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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE THREE WOMEN PILGRIMS IN CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*

BY

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
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OF MASTER OF ARTS

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EDMONTON, ALBERTA
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submitted by ELAINE J. FILAX

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS

Muriel A. Whitaker
(Supervisor)

Date: October 13th, 1987

For my grandmother

"Dear daughter, do not be afraid"

ABSTRACT

The three women pilgrims in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the Second Nun, the Prioress, and the Wife of Bath, are three women amongst twenty-six, or more, men. The three women are seldom studied together, not because the women pilgrims are not studied as women -- they are -- but because the Second Nun is usually left out of such discussions. As far back as William Blake (1809), the Prioress and the Wife of Bath have been seen as opposite poles of "femininity," or "womanhood." This configuration requires reconsideration once the Second Nun is introduced. In addition, these terms, "femininity," "womanhood," and "woman," are, in our own time, sharply contested, providing the context in which to begin studying the three women pilgrims together.

Nevertheless, in bringing the three together, one does not wish to arrive at hasty conclusions, any more than to begin with rigid pre-definitions, as to what may be involved in the study of the subject of women, and the study of women as subjects. Hence, each of the three women pilgrims is studied separately. Their commonalties are an important, but not always immediate concern.

Each pilgrim takes form for us in a variety of contexts: the representation of the General Prologue; the

tale each tells; the literary traditions behind each; the historical evidence; the patterns they form as only three women amongst approximately twenty-nine pilgrims, and, of course, our own perspectives on all of these. No attempt has been made to examine each pilgrim in each context with equal thoroughness, for reasons of length if nothing else. Rather, this thesis presents a feminist's perspective as we consider the possibilities and problems, the limitations and horizons of meaning, which the three women suggest individually and in relation to each other.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The later Middle Ages is an historical period of controversy, complexity, and diversity, perhaps never more so than when it is a matter of "subject:woman." To consider only a small aspect of this great matter, one may reflect, on the one hand, on the tentative consensus among historians that there were more female humans than male in the Middle Ages.[1] On the other hand, one may consider these questions: where? where do we find all these women? what were they doing? and why can we not find them? Women's previous historical invisibility has been a persistent theme and matter of investigation with this century's second wave of feminists.[2] To participate in this investigation is to be immediately embroiled in the political strategies and cross-currents of (the) women's movement. It is, also, to become involved in negotiating what Annette Kolodny called the minefield, or what we might refer to now as the dominant discourse or discourses.[3]

This thesis does not, however, aim to provide a solution to the problem of women's apparent historical invisibility, even if one could formulate the questions satisfactorily. An awareness of this problem does provide the background against which to consider the three women pilgrims, who, with approximately twenty-six male pilgrims, make their pilgrimage to Canterbury in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It is curious, indeed, that the ratio of women to men should be so lop-sided in this literary text, and so lop-sided in men's favor. It is equally odd that the group which makes its way to Canterbury should often be thought of as representative.[4]

There are many possible ways of explaining this imbalance, but several of them will not do. It will not do, for instance, to say that women stayed home and were thus unlikely to be on a pilgrimage. From the top of the medieval hierarchy to the bottom, women were much on the move. Kathleen Casey reminds us that:

> the activities and attitudes of the whole category of persons called women seem to have made a deep impression on the literary elites whose evidence we normally depend upon. From them, posterity gathers that late medieval women of all ranks were highly visible, restless, and troublesome.[5]

Similarly, it will not do to point to a lack in the variety of options available to women in their work or their lifestyle. Women enjoyed and exercised many options.[6] It may be fair to say that literary antecedents were thin for images of women in literature, but this solution sidesteps rather than answers the difficulty; there were just as few literary antecedents for many of Chaucer's male pilgrims. More explanations might be put forth, and just as reasonably would they be seen to be inadequate. Women's apparent invisibility in medieval literature and in much historical writing is not an accurate representation of what we are beginning to learn of women's cultural and societal activities, involvement, and importance.

The curious imbalance between the women and men pilgrims in the _Canterbury Tales_ is the background against which the three women pilgrims will be, in this thesis, the foreground. To focus attention on these three pilgrims, on the Second Nun, the Prioress, and the Wife of Bath, is to practice what has become known as feminist criticism of images of women in literature. This kind of criticism has gone through a period of disrepute. It has been charged with being boring or depressing in the repetitiveness of its conclusions. More seriously, it has been charged with being theoretically naive in its assumptions.[7]

In Chaucerian studies, these charges may have passed us by.[8] Largely because of the representation of the Wife of Bath in the _Canterbury Tales_, Chaucer himself can be said to have engaged the problematic issue of images of women in literature. "Who," Dame Alison asks, "peyntede the leon, tel me who?"[9] The "leon," or lion, is analogous to women, and in both cases men have done the painting. The analogy is curious, for women are compared to that which is non-human and which, moreover, cannot speak for itself. The controlling view, the one with the means to represent, is that of men. At one level of the fictional construct of the Canterbury Tales, it is precisely a man, Geoffrey Chaucer, who speaks, or paints the woman. At another fictional level, the woman speaks, and in speaking refutes the tradition embodied in the analogy. The rhetoric of the analogy, however, puts the tradition prior to the refutation, the man before the woman. The Wife of Bath fights a rearguard action.

The disjunction between the two fictional levels, the man speaking the woman and the woman speaking about the man speaking her, sets up ironical possibilities that reverberate throughout the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale. These ironical possibilities have indubitably contributed to the contradictory and unpredictable results of studies of the images of women in Chaucer's works. Where Sheila Delany finds misogyny, Arlyn Diamond finds an honest attempt to be women's friend.[10] Where H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. finds Chaucer respectful and Robert W. Hanning finds him insightful, Matthew Corrigan finds Chaucer a failure.[11] This wide divergence of critical views on Chaucer's attitudes or positions concerning women, and the controversy it seems to create, is not unique to Chaucerian studies. The same controversy is also to be found in studies of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Rabelais. The controversy is more heated in what medievalists might think of as the moderns: Yeats, Lawrence, or Joyce, and the phenomenon has itself been the subject of study.[12]

It may, indeed, have been the wide divergence of critical views on authors like Chaucer et al that led to a reconsideration of the way in which the question of images-of-women was framed. Recent re-thinking of the question has produced important insights, one of which may be demonstrated by a brief reconsideration of the implications of Simone de Beauvoir's statement: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[13] Given the extreme variations that may be found cross-culturally, racially, economically, or historically, in what it means to be a "woman," Simone de Beauvoir's statement is both absurdly obvious and infinitely complicated. "Woman" is not a biological fact; it is not an essence. It is a culturally conditioned construct that refuses stability. It is also a lived experience in which a biological mark, the basis for the believed essence of woman, operates as a powerful force.[14] The fact that women are "the second sex," even today, and despite our numerical advantage, in the medieval period as today, is indicative of the way that the mark of femaleness has worked to our disadvantage. It is also in spite of our numerical advantage that we study "women in the Middle Ages," instead of studying the Middle Ages as, ipso facto, the cultural production of women. Numerical advantage is less significant than power.

De Beauvoir's famous aphorism may be put another way, in terms of modern semiotics or the study of signs: "woman" is a speaking sign which functions in many different systems of signs. Kathleen Casey, speaking of Chaucerian England, says, "In a fragile reconciliation of competing values and purposes, women and the ideological meaning of woman were at once an essential and perhaps the least reliable link."[15] One reason for the instability of the sign "woman" is that it functions as a commodity of exchange between men.[16] Georges Duby, in The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France, says, "A woman was an object of value because she would bring forth children. An object of exchange, rather; a pawn in a game where men were the players."[17] Woman, however, is not just, or completely, an object of exchange between men; woman speaks, and in speaking, asserts her subjectivity. Luce Irigaray comments that in a patriarchal society, a society in which women are objects of exchange between men, relationships between women cannot be accounted for, "[e]xcept by the assertion that as soon as she desires (herself), as soon as she speaks (expresses herself, to herself), a woman is a man."[18] The danger for women in this paradigm of societal relationships is obvious. We must not construct or adhere to any theory which, as Theresa de Lauretis says of the theories of Lacan in psychoanalysis and Levi-Straus in semiotics, "logically excludes the possibility -- the theoretical possibility -- of women ever being subjects and producers of culture."[19] If it is difficult to conceive of this possibility in an age as male-dominated as the Middle Ages, it ought to be as difficult to conceive of in our own, an age equally male-dominated.

Attempts to reconcile the opposition between woman as object and woman as subject, between woman as sign and woman as sign-maker, between woman as victim and woman as agent, continue to be made. Working along beside these attempts, women have begun to re-vision and reconstruct both the discourse of history and the history of discourse.[20] Shulamith Shahar, in her *The Fourth Estate: A history of women in the Middle Ages*, for instance, observes that in "estates literature," which occurs from the twelfth century on, there are three common features in the description of society. First, the older conception of a triune society, "depicted as horizontal, purposeful, and harmonious," is replaced by a new vertical conception of society. Second, the previous division of society into those who pray, those who fight, and those who work is gradually overlaid with socio-professional sub-divisions based on distinctions made within each of the older orders. Third, "women are almost always categorized separately," as a fourth estate. Within this estate, the estate of women, women are subdivided by their social-economic position or their marital status or a combination of the two.[21] Neither of these sub-divisions is used with men. The new conception of society evident in estates literature is the theory. The purpose of Shahar's book is to examine "to what extent theory matched reality."[22]

As Shahar notes, the medieval categorization of women as a separate class provides the justification for her study.[23] It may also serve as a justification for the present study of the three women pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales. The concept of the fourth estate of women serves as an indicator, a shorthand expression, of the medieval belief in an essential nature of woman and women. In this conception, the two terms, woman and women, seem to collapse into one. The late medieval belief that women comprised a separate class or estate should not be considered simply as an external influence on literature. Literature is itself an ideological system or systems which interacts with other such systems. From such interactions, the system of literature will both exchange and generate structures and values. Because of her exchange value and her instability as a sign, woman will be an important component of this process. Because she is also an agent, a speaking sign, and -- at least, in theory -- a subject, her strategies of survival and desire will mark cultural productions.

One such strategy of either survival or desire is absence, withdrawal, from the arena of domination or oppression. An example of an effective use of this strategy may be found in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 as described by William Woods. The Revolt was precipitated by the declaration of yet another tax. Taxation of the poorest increased, while it was reduced for the rich. From this particular tax collection, only beggars would be exempted.

When the tax collection returns came in, it was found that the population had dropped by a third from the returns of 1377. There was, Woods continues, "an astonishing shortage of widowed mothers in the returns, of aunts, sisters and unmarried girls. Barring wives, women seemed all but to have vanished, and in the poorer counties, the disparity was greater than anywhere else."[24] Absence, then, may signal a deliberate withdrawal as a response to oppression. It may also signal an exclusion, as with the comparative absence of women writers, or the absence of women from the upper echelons of the church hierarchy. Absence, in this context, may occur concomitantly with an obsession with women. Woman as temptress, as sexual glutton, is an example of an obsession with that which has been excluded.

Absence in medieval culture is an extremely difficult topic. In medieval Christianity, that which is absent is accorded the reverence of the Real: the saints, the Virgin Mary, the Trinity; while that which is present is considered insignificant, transient, and ephemeral. The opposition of the Real and the merely real carries over into such areas as the spirit and body duality, or the reason and appetite duality. We may find it in relation to other oppositions like authority and experience or grace and nature. As Lee Patterson comments on "the polarization of Eve and Mary": "But medieval feelings are rarely any less complicated than modern ones, and this straightforward categorization is continually subverted by qualifications and complexities."[25]

If we gather together several of these oppositions with absence, keeping Patterson's caution in mind, we might be led to ask what would happen to the representation of women in such a configuration; or to put it another way: what is the Second Nun doing in the Canterbury Tales?

The Second Nun is barely noticed in literary criticism, but, then, she is barely there in the text either. John Matthews Manly makes the intriguing suggestion that the difference between the effect of the Prioress's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale, as between the Prioress and the Second Nun, is that with the Second Nun and her tale, "Chaucer has failed to visualize or to make his readers see the principal characters, . . . [they] remain to him and to us mere names."[26] The second chapter of this thesis is an attempt to understand the effect of absence on our conception of the representation of the Second Nun. It is an attempt to understand, as well, why the Second Nun, visually absent, might be significant.

An observation that would seem to work against the neat distinction between the Real and the merely real, the absent and the present, is the observation that the Middle Ages was an image-ridden society.[27] This apparent contradiction should not surprise us: Derek Brewer has traced three different class systems operative in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, and Charles Muscatine has argued for different religious attitudes in the Chaucer canon.[28] Some critics, Russell A. Peck or Peter Elbow, for instance, argue that a Chaucerian characteristic is, as Peck says, that "[h]e [Chaucer] seems to prefer the questions and will leave the conclusions to the clerks (or rather, the clerks to their conclusions)."29 Peck also comments on the importance of nominalism in Chaucer's time. Nominalism, Peck suggests, is a group of doctrines which may be understood as "questions about whether universals exist in creation or only in our heads." Chaucer's interest, according to Peck, is "in those generalizations which fill people's heads and which exist there exclusively insofar as they matter to that individual. . . . [He] is not interested in the questions as problems in logic, but, rather, as phenomena of experience."30 William J. Courtenay gives us an insight into what this may mean. He says:

> If the fragmentation of the medieval synthesis can no longer be used as the hallmark of nominalism around which to build a theory of the development of late gothic art, the increased importance given to empiricism in the nominalist system should have some implications for the development of the visual and plastic arts, if not architecture. Ockhamist epistemology is not simply empirical; it is based on visual experience, and it takes the eye as the primary sense organ around which to build a theory of knowledge. . . . "Knowing" in Ockhamism is primarily "seeing." Such an

> epistemology certainly parallels the emphasis in late medieval and early Renaissance art on rendering the visual world with increasing accuracy.[31]

Yet if seeing is an important aspect of nominalism, another critic, Carolly Erickson, reminds us of the importance of sight and metaphors of sight during much of the Middle Ages. She reminds us, too, that medieval sight includes both the tangible and the imagined.[32]

The "portrait" of the Prioress may be set in the context of this emphasis on sight. Yet, if we ask what we see from the description of the Prioress given to us in the General Prologue, we will miss its significance unless we are aware of the two codes which structure that sight. We do not, that is, simply see a woman with "Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,/ Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed" (GP, 152-3). Once we know that this is the description of the courtly lady in numerous works before and after Chaucer, we will wonder what it means in the context of the description of a woman religious.[33] Chapter III of this thesis is concerned with the way in which our understanding, our sight, of the Prioress is structured by the use of the religious and the courtly codes in her description. It will be argued that the use of these two codes permeates every aspect of the Prioress's literary existence, and that two codes meet at the sign "woman," thereby constituting a movement of enclosure at that sign.

It might be expected from the descriptions of the chapters dealing with the Second Nun and the Prioress that the Wife of Bath would be the culmination of the extreme opposite of the Second Nun. The Wife of Bath is fully presented to us in the General Prologue, and in this aspect, she is like the Prioress. Moreover, the Wife speaks of herself, and apparently of her existence as a woman in the Middle Ages. She seems highly individualized, and her prologue and tale are very long. She is the only secular woman pilgrim represented to us, and she is represented in great detail. Even in the critical writings which accrue to the Second Nun and the Wife of Bath, they are diametrically opposed. Little has been written about the Second Nun, while to judge from the number of critical discussions that have centered on the Wife of Bath, she constitutes a small "black hole" within that larger "scholarly black hole" known as Chaucerian studies.[34]

The enormous wealth of words written about the Wife of Bath requires a different approach than that used with the Second Nun or the Prioress. In scanning the criticism, it is interesting to note the extent to which many critics find themselves drawn into the debate that structures the prologue, or failing that, the complexities of the Wife of Bath's character.[35] The former concern will take us back to the questions about Chaucer's position on images of women. There seems little doubt that either, or indeed, practically any position can be asserted and evidenced. The latter concern, the Wife of Bath's character, seems destined to lead us into a labyrinth of murky metaphors as to what exactly may make up a character in a literary text.[36]

The fourth chapter of this thesis attempts to circumvent these issues by first examining a theme common to the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, that is, marriage. The intent is not so much to compare the Wife of Bath to the Second Nun -- or anyone else -- as it is to examine the way marriage becomes a defining and limiting factor in the Wife of Bath's representation. The preliminary, and not surprising, conclusion of this examination is that the Wife of Bath is a male fantasy or wish-fulfillment.

There are a number of critics who deny this conclusion, suggesting instead that we need to look further. Robert W. Hanning's analysis is, in many ways, typical of this approach, and it has been singled out for a detailed discussion of some of the implications of both the approach and its conclusions. Hanning's interpretation is both attractive and troubling. It will be the latter aspect which will concern us here.[37] Other critics agree that the Wife of Bath is a male fantasy. Like the present writer, they reach this as a preliminary conclusion. To reach this conclusion is to imply that the Wife of Bath lacks possibilities, that she has no further or possible significance for contemporary feminist readers. Two critics who reach this conclusion, Barbara Gottfried and Lee Patterson, are, nevertheless, reluctant to abandon the Wife of Bath.[38] Neither critic is a white knight charging to the Wife of Bath's rescue. Rather, both are sophisticated theorists and readers who understand that the Wife of Bath's significance for feminist readers may be won back from the jeopardy in which her status as a male fantasy places her. From a closer examination of the arguments of Gottfried and Patterson, we will gain an understanding of the possibilities of recuperating the Wife of Bath's significance, proposing, along the way, yet another possibility.

The focus in the second part of the fourth chapter, then, is not on the Wife of Bath, but on the readers of the Wife of Bath. Although this focus is detailed and explicit in the chapter dealing with the Wife of Bath, it is also an implicit thread running throughout the thesis. Concern with readers or critics is part of a well-established pattern in literary commentary, as we agree or disagree, use or misuse, translate, interpolate, gloss, build, or rely on readings other than our own. Feminist literary criticism both informs and modifies this well-established pattern. Indeed, some would understand feminist literary criticism as disruptive or subversive of the pattern.[39] To the extent that feminist criticism interrogates the invisibility and silence of women, as well as the limitations of any discourse in which this is possible, to that extent it disrupts the smooth hegemony of reading and writing. To add to this endeavor a study of representations of women is to complicate an already complicated matter. More than that, the accumulated effects of these modifications, disruptions, and complications redefine the boundaries of the matter of "subject:woman."

Chapter I: Notes

[1] David Herlihy, "Life Expectancies for Women in Medieval Society," in *The Role of Woman in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rosmarie Thee Morewedge (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), pp. 1-22; and Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life: A Small Sound of the Trumpet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), pp. 18-19. The numerical preponderance of women is not a well researched or documented aspect of the medieval period, and any large generalization must be qualified. According to Herlihy, "There is, in other words, a body of scattered but consistent comment which indicates that between the early and the late Middle Ages, women had gained a superiority over men in life expectancy which they have since retained" (11). The ratios varied "from 109 to over 120 females per 100 males" (13). Labarge raises a number of the questions which such data suggest. She wonders, for instance, about the high number of men in noble households: "The ratio might be as high as four to one in a household actually headed by a woman, where one would expect more female companions, and soared to thirty-seven to one at a feast which boasted of its large number of women" (p. 19). The situation appears to have been different in England. Kathleen Casey, "Women in Norman and Plantagenet England," in *The Women of England: From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present: Interpretive Bibliographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Kanner (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), pp. 83-123, says, "[Josiah Cox] Russell's pioneering study, *British Medieval Population* (1948) suggests, among other things, that England consistently maintained a preponderance of males that would delay emergence there of the 'woman question'" (p. 93). Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), suggests, however, that for a variety of reasons, including the large number of celibate males, there was probably a "surplus female population," especially in terms of marriage and career options (pp. 53-55).

[2] In historical studies, the best example of this concern is a collection of essays called, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977). In literary studies, the focus tends to be on women writers. For an overview, see, Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, New Accents Series, gen. ed. Terence Hawkes (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 50-69.

[3] Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies*, 6 (1980), 1-25. Kolodny's metaphor was heavily criticized, the best replacement being suggested by Jane Marcus, "Storming the Toolshed," *Signs*, 7 (1982), 622-40.

[4] F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), says of "the device of the pilgrimage": "It afforded Chaucer an opportunity to bring together a representative group of various classes of society" (p. 2).

[5] Kathleen Casey, "The Cheshire Cat: Reconstructing the Experience of Medieval Women," in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 226.

[6] Like any other generalization, this one requires some qualifications: many people, female and male, continued to live in poverty. Their options were obviously limited. The best short overview of the possibilities available to women is Kathleen Casey's "The Cheshire Cat." As with men, women's increasing opportunities were linked to "the ever-widening market for more humdrum products during the later Middle Ages" (p. 229). Casey also points out the limitations imposed on women: significantly, their exclusion from "[c]ertain key gilds," like "the scholars, the lawyers, the notaries, the goldsmiths, and those fast-rising entrepreneurs, the portrait painters" (p. 229).

[7] See Moi, pp. 42-49; and K. K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 70-76. Images-of-women-in-literature criticism is usually charged with theoretical naiveté because of its concern with realism and the importance of role-models for women. In the first concern, the status of "reality" is often unexamined, tending toward an ahistorical approach to literature. The second concern often leaves unexamined the relationship between literature and life.

[8] Several exceptions to this statement may be found: Karen Alkalay-Gut, "Problems in Literary Herstory: Chaucerian Msconceptions," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 6 (April 1983), 73-78; and Beatrice Gottlieb, "The Problem of Feminism in the Fifteenth Century," in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, ed. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1985), pp. 337-64. In these critics, the opposition between medievalism and feminism is an operative

duality. Alkalay-Gut suggests that the two can work as correctives to each other, while Gottlieb argues that to apply feminism, a complex modern concept, to medieval culture is to be anachronistic. Gottlieb overlooks the fact that all historical writing is, to some extent, anachronistic, and that medievalism is itself a complex modern concept. Like Gottlieb's, Alkalay-Gut's division between medievalism and feminism involves a questionable opposition of the two.

[9] Geoffrey Chaucer, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), The Wife of Bath's Prologue, l. 692. All further references are to this edition and are indicated in the text by line number. Chaucer's use of the analogy of painting the lion is central for three critics: Mary Carruthers, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," PMLA, 94 (1979), 209-22; Susan K. Hagen, "The Wife of Bath, the Lion, and the Critics," in The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence, Imagination, ed. Constance H. Berman, Charles W. Connell, and Judith Rice Rothschild (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1985), pp. 130-38; and Marjorie M. Malvern, "'Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?' Rhetorical and Didactic Roles Played by an Aesopic Fable in the Wife of Bath's Prologue," Studies in Philology, 80 (1983), 238-52. All three critics understand the analogy in similar ways: Carruthers says, "The fable of painting the lion teaches that the 'truth' of any picture often has more to do with the prejudices and predilections of the painter than with the 'reality' of the subject and that truthful art (and morality) must take account of this complexly mutual relationship" (209). Hagen says, "And I propose that Chaucer was familiar enough with the lion to consider painting this picture from her perspective" (p. 132). Malvern concludes, "Not altogether unlike the lion who, provoked by man's mockery of and sense of superiority to lions, puts the man in danger of his life and thereby shows the humbled man that 'truth' is not to be found in a 'fable,' which is an 'illusion,' or in a 'picture,' which 'resembles a dream,' but in a 'deed,' Chaucer's Wife of Bath at last shows her proud clerk Jankyn through her 'deed' that 'truth' is best sought outside pictures of women found in misogynic writings" (251-52).

[10] Sheila Delany, Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), p. 70; and Arlyn Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," in The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p. 83.

[11] H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., "Of a Fire in the Dark: Public and Private Feminism in the Wife of Bath's Tale,"

Women's Studies, Vol. 11, Nos. 1 & 2 (1984), 176; Robert W. Hanning, "From *Eva* and *Ave* to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play," *Signs*, 2 (1977), 582; and Matthew Corrigan, "Chaucer's Failure with Woman: The Inadequacy of Criseyde," *Western Humanities Review*, 23 (1969), 111.

[12] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Finding Feminist Readings: Dante-Yeats," in *American Criticism in the Poststructuralist Age*, ed. Ira Konigsberg (n.p.: University of Michigan, 1981), pp. 42-65, regarding Dante and Yeats; Mary Anne Ferguson, "As Others See Us," rev. of *Joyce and Feminism*, by Bonnie Kime Scott; *Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women*, by Cornelia Nixon; *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature*, by Declan Kiberd; and *Waugh on Women*, by Jacqueline McDonnell, *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. IV, No. 5 (Feb. 1987), p. 17 for Joyce and Lawrence; Wayne C. Booth, "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982), 45-76, on Rabelais; and Spivak for a discussion of the phenomenon.

[13] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 267.

[14] Precisely what the mark of femaleness may be remains a matter of debate, but the clitoris has been suggested as a strategic choice by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 154-84.

[15] Casey, "Women in Norman and Plantagenet England," p. 105.

[16] The idea that women are objects of exchange between men comes from Claude Lévi-Strauss', *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, et al (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), for instance pp. 62-63. There have been many replies to this idea: Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, had seen Levi-Straus's work in manuscript; hence, *The Second Sex* may be seen as a reply. One of the best, recent replies to this theory is Luce Irigaray's, "Women on the Market," and "Commodities among Themselves," both in her collection of essays, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 170-97.

[17] Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 235.

[18] Irigaray, "Commodities among Themselves," p. 194.

19 Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 20.

[20] The term "re-vision" is from Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision (1971)," in her collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), pp. 33-49. Rich defines the term as: "Re-vision -- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction -- is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (p. 35).

[21] Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A history of women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 1-3.

22 Shahar, p. 4.

[23] Shahar, p. 4.

[24] William Woods, *England in the Age of Chaucer* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976), pp. 175-76.

[25] Lee Patterson, "'For the Wyves love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Canterbury Tales*," *Speculum*, 58 (1983), 659.

26 John Matthews Manly, "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), p. 288. Another intriguing suggestion is made by Chauncey Wood, "Chaucer's Use of Signs in His Portrait of the Prioress," in *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry*, ed. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke, Jr. (University: University of Alabama Press, 1981), pp. 81-101, who says, "Indeed, as Robert P. Miller has pointed out to me, this portrait of an unspiritual Prioress, packed with equivocal signs, is followed directly by reference to the very spiritual Second Nun, who in the General Prologue is not described at all" (p. 100). See, also, Chapter 1, note 68, below, for further comments on the barely present Second Nun.

[27] See Henry Kraus, *The Living Theatre of Medieval Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), pp. 170-82, for a brief discussion of "the great 'quarrel of images'" at the Council of Nicea, and the continuing effects on art during the Middle Ages (pp. 170-82).

28 D. S. Brewer, "Class Distinction in Chaucer," *Speculum*, 43 (1968), 290-305; and Charles Muscatine, *Poetry*

and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), pp. 111-45. Neither critic comments on how women fit or do not fit into these categories.

[29] Peter Elbow, *Oppositions in Chaucer* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975); and Russell A. Peck, "Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions," *Speculum*, 53 (1978), 745. Elbow argues that Chaucer's characteristic method is to affirm contradictions, working towards their limitations: "Affirming contradictions and not being in too much of a hurry to get rid of them -- Chaucer's dialectic -- must be one of the patterns of thought that makes wise people wise" (p. 161).

[30] Peck, "Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions," 745.

[31] William J. Courtenay, "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkhaus with Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 57.

[32] Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 5-6.

[33] D. S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially 'Harley Lyrics', Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans," *Modern Language Review*, L (1955), 257-69, provides the best overview of the courtly convention; while John Livingston Lowes, "Simple and Coy. A Note on Fourteenth Century Poetic Diction," *Anglia*, 33 (1910), 440-51, argues for the importance of courtly love conventions in the Prioress's description.

[34] The metaphor of Chaucerian scholarship as a "black hole" comes from Richard Sullivan, "Changing Perspectives on the Concept of the Middle Ages," *The Centennial Review*, 28 (1984), 78.

[35] Two recent overviews of the criticism on the Wife of Bath are: Velma Bourgeois Richmond, "Pacience in Adversitee: Chaucer's Presentation of Marriage," *Viator*, 10 (1979), 323-354; and Michael E. Williams, "Three Metaphors of Criticism and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Chaucer Review*, 20 (1985-86), 144-57. Williams excludes deconstructionist criticism from his analysis, but notes that the three different metaphors of criticism -- machine, organism, and opposite poles of attraction -- produce three different stories or "patterns of coherence" (155). While Williams focuses on the tale, Richmond concentrates on the Wife of Bath as a part of the marriage debate.

36 Ann B. Murphy, "The Process of Personality in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *The Centennial Review*, 28 (1984), 204-22, uses the metaphor of weaving to describe the way in which personality is created in Chaucer. Peter R. Schroeder, "Hidden Depths: Dialogue and Characterization in Chaucer and Malory," *PMLA*, 98 (1983), 374-87, argues that Chaucer conceives of character as a "fixed essence" (382), although "a literary character is always an illusion, a set of verbal cues or clues that we recreate on the basis, among other things, of our own experience of real people" (384). The best essay on character remains Hélène Cixous, "The Character of 'Character'," trans. Keith Cohen, *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 383-402. Schroeder's assessment of Cixous's essay -- "a diatribe" (386, n. 13) -- is certainly odd in view of his conclusions, and one cannot help but feel that Cixous would find his assessment of her amusing.

37 My concern with the troublesome aspects of Hanning's interpretation in his "From *Eva* and *Ave*," is not in any way intended as an assessment. The intent is rather to follow theoretical trends in literary criticism.

38 Barbara Gottfried, "Conflict and Relationship, Sovereignty and Survival: Parables of Power in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*," *Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984-85), 202-24; and Patterson, 656-95. My intention with the interpretations of these two critics is the same as with Hanning's, "From *Eva* and *Ave*," that is, to follow certain theoretical trends in literary criticism.

39 For an influential articulation of this understanding, see Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), pp. 245-64, especially, p. 257. For a development on the related issue of resistance, see Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 3-4, who says, "The notion of resistance . . . is itself not unambiguous" (p. 3).

Chapter II: The Second Nun

When we think of the women pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales, we may find it easy to forget the Second Nun. Indeed, she is often forgotten. Interpretations tend to focus on either the Prioress or the Wife of Bath, or a comparison of the two.[1] The Second Nun, in both the General Prologue and in commentary on it, is merely an aside, an adjunct to the Prioress, less interesting or controversial even than the Prioress's other adjunct, "and preestes thre" (GP, 164). The Second Nun's only claim to fame is that she accompanies the Prioress, and one is more likely to remember and focus on the Prioress who is accompanied by another nun than on the second nun.

The Prioress upstages the Second Nun in a number of ways. She is described before the Second Nun, at greater length, in more detail, and with more ambiguity. Then, too, the Prioress is the leader, or head, of a company of which the Second Nun seems to be but an insignificant part. Even the designation by which we refer to her, a designation not provided in the General Prologue, leads us away from the Second Nun to the first nun, that is, to the Prioress. The mere verse and a half accorded to the Second Nun describes her in terms which make her literary existence dependent on and relative to the Prioress: "Another NONNE with hire hadde she,/That was hir chapeleyne" (GP, 163-4). This is a very sparse representation, if it can be called a representation at all. It may be more accurate to think of the Second Nun as the intimation of a configuration positioned relative to the Prioress. Indeed, she is grammatically dependent on her subject, the Prioress.

The Second Nun shares with the Prioress a vocation or a calling as a nun, and she provides services to the Prioress in her function as a chaplain. In both these aspects, too, we are referred constantly back to the Prioress. There is no reciprocal movement; nothing about the Prioress refers us to the Second Nun. This, at least, is the general consensus of critical authority. E. Talbot Donaldson is the single critic in my readings who looks at the Prioress's entourage, and he looks right past the Second Nun to the three priests.[2] Nevertheless, the difficulty of discussing the Second Nun without implicitly discussing the Prioress should not be underestimated. A quick scan of the criticism will show that the reverse is not true. It is customary to discuss the Prioress without reference to the Second Nun.

The non-reciprocity in the definitional relationship between the Prioress and the Second Nun has a number of curious effects. First, it places the Second Nun in a position of subordination. It also makes her insignificant in herself, and hence, again, difficult to discuss in isolation from the Prioress. Moreover, to describe what the Second Nun is in relation to the other two women pilgrims is to make a series of statements indicating negation, absence, or lack. Unlike Madame Eglentyne or Dame Alys, the Second Nun lacks a title and a name. She is not described according to her appearance. She is represented neither in terms of her body nor in terms of her dress. She has no face, no features, no golden hair, and no small, round breasts.[3] No colors, no animals, no jewellery, no behaviors are associated with her. There are no secular associations. In the General Prologue, she even lacks a voice.

Thus, what differentiates the Second Nun from the other two women pilgrims is precisely the lack of differentiation. She is, of course, different from the Wife of Bath in being a religious woman, a nun, and from the Prioress in being a chaplain. There is, however, no differentiation at an individual level. One is perhaps justified in saying that she has no character at all, although this assessment does not exhaust the possibilities of her representation. It simply means that we must shift ground. The non-character of the Second Nun will be discussed in a number of different contexts: the historical position of nuns, some literary traditions, the ideal of woman in the Middle Ages, her relation to the Prioress, and the *Second Nun's Tale*. By way of conclusion, some general remarks will be made on the link between the Second Nun of the General Prologue and the Second Nun as teller of the legend of St. Cecilie.

Historical context is a difficult category for the literary critic to work with. The relations between history and literature are seldom simple, often changing, and inevitably arbitrary. When we consider the relations between history and literature as they intersect at the category of women, we may find, with Virginia Woolf, that we have created a monster: "It was certainly an odd monster that one made up by reading the historians first and the poets afterwards -- a worm winged like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet."[4] This odd monster is what we will find in considering the relationship between the Second Nun and the historical position of nuns in medieval England.

The relative preponderance of nuns in the _Canterbury Tales_, two of the three women pilgrims, is distinctly at odds with the historical proportions. The number of women in monasteries in England declined steadily overall, from 1250 to 1440. The largest decline took place between 1328 and 1370, even taking into account the devastation of the population from the plague.[5] The numbers had never been large. As compared to about six hundred monasteries housing some fourteen thousand men, there were only one hundred and thirty-eight monasteries housing between fifteen hundred and two thousand women.[6] Women's monasteries were smaller and poorer than either those of men in England or those of their counterparts on the Continent. In general, the status of women's monasteries in England was low, a cultural fact that both produced and was a product of their poverty and size.

Over half the monasteries for women in England were Benedictine, and it is generally accepted that the Prioress and Second Nun are of this order. The Benedictine order had three occupations: divine service, manual labor, and reading. Divine service is, of course, associated with the Prioress in the Canterbury Tales. Of the other two occupations, manual labor was becoming undignified, and as the universities became the center of learning, reading became more restricted. Women were excluded from the universities, and the shift in the site of learning took away any justification for learned nuns. Nuns were, in any case, restricted in the numbers, age, and sex of the pupils that they could take in to their monasteries. The duration of the stay of pupils was also restricted.[7]

Eileen Power summarizes the educational attainments of nuns as: "reading and singing the services of the church, sometimes but not always writing, Latin very rarely after the thirteenth century, French very rarely after the fourteenth century; needlework and embroidery; and perhaps that elementary knowledge of physic, which was the possession of most ladies of their class."[8] In none of these areas did nuns of the later Middle Ages achieve either the expertise or renown of their Anglo-Saxon predecessors.[9] Although the increasing use of the vernacular was of some benefit to English nuns, making some reading materials accessible, the declining value placed on manual labor and the still much restricted reading materials resulted in intense monotony for the nuns.[10]

More might be said of the historical position of nuns in medieval England, but beyond this general outline, it is more directly related to the appearance of the Prioress than the non-appearance of the Second Nun. One final historical note on the Second Nun's function as "chapeleyne" is in order. F. R. Robinson glosses "chapeleyne" as "a kind of secretary and personal assistant to the Prioress."[11] The modern associations may give this definition too secular a cast. Eileen Power gives us somewhat different associations in defining a "chapeleyne" as more of a companion-witness.[12]

The function of the Second Nun as a companion to the Prioress is quite clear. She is the external indication of the Prioress's good reputation. In this respect, she opens as large a gulf as could be imagined between the Prioress and the Wife of Bath. As a companion, she guarantees the Prioress's good reputation to the outside world. As a witness, the Second Nun serves a more theological purpose, a purpose recognizable in the modern word "chaplain," but given a different slant by virtue of the fact that this chaplain is a medieval female.

As they are today in the Catholic church, and in many other religions, women were barred from performing or initiating most of the offices provided by the official religious institution.[13] The English medieval monastic orders for women were no exception to this rule: hence at least one of the "preestes thre" in the Prioress's company. Although women may not perform such priestly tasks, they may, in this type of religion, perform a similar, but more private function as their sister's external conscience. Theoretically, the Second Nun would not only guarantee the Prioress's good reputation; she would ensure it.

In secular terms, the function of the chapeleyne is similar to that of the Duenna. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the description of the Prioress's eating habits is a borrowing from an unflattering speech by Duenna in the Roman de la Rose.[14] The description of the Prioress has echoes of a secular duenna; the Second Nun holds the equivalent religious position. Although the function of the duenna is often diverted in satiric literature to a consideration of her presumed and immoral desires as they relate to men, the essence of her function remains untouched. Her function is performed whenever, or wherever, the male feels no desire for the duenna. The duenna's good reputation remains, as it were, by default.

In so far as the Second Nun remains bodily invisible, she may be said to fulfill her public function as chaplain to the Prioress. Whether she fulfills that more private, theological function is a debatable matter which hinges on the question of how her fulfillment of this role could be represented. According to Jill Mann, nuns were thought to have the same faults as other women in medieval satiric literature: "they are considered to be sensual, quarrelsome or recalcitrant, deceitful, fond of luxury, unable to keep a secret, lacrimose, and hungry for praise."[15] Sister Mary Byrne, in The Tradition of the Nun in Medieval England, points out, however, that "[s]atiric materials upon the nun produced in England during the period from the twelfth to the mid-sixteenth century are remarkably scant, are for the most part nondescript and fragmentary." Not until the sixteenth century, Byrne notes, is "the nun . . . attacked in a manner not to be distinguished from attacks upon other women."[16]

In didactic and historiographical literature, Byrne traces the tradition of the simple nun to Aldhelm's De Laudibus Virginitatis. In this text, we may find both an early articulation of the ideal and an enduring summary of the type.[17] According to Byrne:

> This nun-figure . . . is an ideal embodiment of virginity and of monastic decorum. Aloof from the world, she is modestly retiring. She cherishes the solitude of her cell. She is docilely obedient and studious. Urged on by the flames of divine love burning within her, she presses on tremulously, longingly, toward heaven. Impatient of the trammels of the flesh and "breathless with adoration", in anticipation of her heavenly occu-

> pation, she breaks forth alternately into deep sighs and snatches of sacred song and psalmody. She cannot hide her tears; they well up from the depth of compunction burdening her heart. Sweetly satiated with the delight and regaled with the nectar of the contemplative life, this "unblemish'd form of Chastity" finds nothing on earth comparable to her virginal joy.[18]

Later, the admonitions and precepts of the ideal of the simple nun were directed to the anchoress. The redirection was both ideological and representational. The nun looked for her reward in the next life; accordingly, "all was relatively vague when expressed in terms of this earth." The anchoress looked to both "a mystical union with Our Lord on this earth as well as to a spiritual union hereafter." "Therefore," Byrne continues, "symbolism is dropped and its place taken by metaphors borrowed directly from the field of human love."[19] Following this movement from symbolism to metaphor, we might argue with Alfred David that the secular poet became involved in a contradiction, particularly when metaphor moved to image. " [T]he poet," according to David, "of necessity, must communicate by means of images."[20] The more powerful the image, the less likely that the audience will move beyond the image to the spiritual reality which the image was intended to evoke. In support of David's argument as it relates to Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales, we may note that Sister Mary Byrne does not discuss Chaucer's representation of the Prioress both because it is drawn from real life, and because "Chaucer's portrait is photographic rather than satiric."[21] Is it possible, then, to represent, in image, the ideal nun?

Judith Ferster, in a different context, suggests an answer. Discussing the Book of the Duchess, Ferster says of White (Fr. Blanche) that she is "one of the many medieval examples of women who are important because they are absent."[22] Absence may be understood, here, in two ways. White, for instance, is very thoroughly represented as a physical body in the world. In this sense, she is present or represented. She is also, however, dead. In this sense, we may say that she is an absence that operates powerfully and pervasively in the poem.

Hence, it was possible to represent physically, imagistically, the ideal woman, but her physical representation acts as an absence. She is either imagined, left behind, or unobtainable, and often all three at once. At least in part, the ideal woman functions as an absence for the protection of her idealization. For a woman to act or interact, to change, to be in process, counteracts idealization. Change or mutability in the medieval world is associated with the worldly, not with the ideal. In her unchanging perfection, the ideal woman is, as Eileen Power says, "the adored one, the source of all romance and the object of all worship."[23]

The very pinnacle of womanhood during much of the medieval period was the Virgin Mary. Although the understanding of the Virgin changed remarkably over time, one attribute was consistently and unchangingly hers: her virginity. Marina Warner, noting the strength and persistence with which Mary's virginity is extolled, remarks, "The cult of Mary is inextricably interwoven with Christian ideas about the dangers of the flesh and their special connection with women."[24] The pattern traced above about the ideal woman is largely applicable to the Virgin Mary. She is physically represented, but is not seen as changing or acting. It is precisely her absence that is functional.

It may fairly be argued that the Virgin Mary's functional absence is attributable to her position in the Christian religion as it was understood in the medieval period. Her absence belies her spiritual and iconographic presence. The Virgin Mary, also, however, serves as a role model of religious practice.[25] In other words, her position in the medieval Christian religion comes about because of the kind of life she led, or more properly, because of the woman she was. It is both unfortunate and telling that the historical essence of this woman from Galilee is her virginity.

There are, of course, other models of religious practice in the medieval Christian religion, and like the model of the Virgin Mary, they were understood differently at different times. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, in Saints and Society, trace the developments of new models of religious practice that resulted in sainthood between 1000 and 1700.[26] Women's way to sainthood could be tortuous, and it was definitely affected by the biological mark of her femaleness, but women found role models, religious practices, that expressed their deeply held religious beliefs. Nevertheless, Mary achieved through and because of her femaleness what no other human could have attained. She attained semi-divine status.[27]

The only other figure in the medieval Christian religion to have a similar status is Jesus. Like the Virgin Mary, he is, in theory, an impossible ideal. Unlike Mary, however, the model of religious belief that his life has suggested is not dependent on the biological mark of his maleness. The male is held to encompass the female, in this as in other matters. Not coincidently, Jesus acts and he changes. His life is rich with change: he learns, becomes angry, suffers, and struggles. He undergoes process, and he thereby becomes a realizable ideal of religious practice for both sexes. Mary, as the title of Warner's book emphasizes, is Alone of All Her Sex. Interestingly enough, Caroline Bynum describes women mystics of the thirteenth century as stressing Christ's humanity: his "physicality, his corporeality, his being-in-the-body-ness."[28] They attempted mystical union with Christ through the Eucharist. One might add that in using this configuration of belief, they also circumvented the Virgin Mary as the ideal woman. The female model being impossible, they chose the human model which was male.[29]

Christian doctrine allowed for the possibility of direct contact with divinity, and for many women mystics this opened otherwise unavailable possibilities.[30] The conception of the nun as bride of Christ is exceptionally rich, allowing the possibility of a relationship the male counterpart of which is the powerful relationship between the priest and God. The very emphasis on Christ's physicality, however, points to the medieval obsession with the body, but particularly the female body. This obsession with the female body is too well-documented to require much elaboration here. Philippe de Navarre, in _Les Quatre Ages de l'Homme_, says, "But if a woman keeps her body intact, all her other defects are hidden and she can hold her head high."[31] Ann Haskell, commenting on the representation of women in literature, echoes the same sentiment, "a woman's physical virtue superseded all other moral considerations. Indeed, physical virtue was so important that it could apparently cancel out other varieties of errors."[32]

For the religious woman, physical virtue meant virginity. Although it was both possible and acceptable practice for widows to become nuns, the ideal entailed virginity.[33] The emphasis on virginity created some problems in the early days of the Church's establishment.[34] By the late medieval period, the church had brought marriage increasingly under its control and within the sphere of the ideologically acceptable. Nevertheless, conflict between the ideal of virginity and the necessity of marriage continued. Often, as Georges Duby points out, the conflict took the form of an institutional struggle: the church pitted against the aristocracy.[35] Within the fourth estate, the estate of women, the sub-division of women according to their sexual relations with men still placed the virgin at the top, followed by the widow, and, at the bottom, the wife.[36] The virgin, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, "was on a different existential plane from other human beings."[37] And, the Church continued to reward women with sainthood according to the same hierarchy of values. As Weinstein and Bell comment, "For women virginity was everything -- once having given up her maidenhood a woman was irrevocably excluded from the select company of those who lived in Mary's image."[38]

Virginity was a source of power in medieval Christian thought as well as an ideal.[39] Unlike other virtues, virginity required not a struggle to attain, but a struggle to maintain. No subjective evaluation was involved, and no goal was in view; as Weinstein and Bell say, "virginity admitted of no degrees; its loss was irrevocable."[40] With the maintenance of virginity, however, came power. Marina Warner points out two ways in which the power of virginity operated:

> First, the Fathers of the Church taught that the virginal life reduced the special penalties of the Fall in women and was therefore holy. Second the image of the virgin body was the supreme image of wholeness, and wholeness was equated with holiness.[41]

According to Warner, the Church Fathers "conceived of a virgin's body as seamless, unbroken, a literal epiphany of integrity."[42] The Virgin Mary's physical integrity was not even broken by birth. The non-virgin was considered physically open, open, that is, to sin, and imaged as the "gateway to Satan."[43]

The importance of virginity in medieval Christian thought can hardly be over-emphasized. The mother of Jesus has the epithet "virgin" permanently attached to her name. The Virgin Mary's virginity was understood as a physical fact, unlike the use of the epithet with Greek goddesses whose virginity did not signify the physical presence of the hymen. Operating in medieval Christian ideology, the physical presence of the hymen was the center around which revolved a number of possibilities. To put it another way: "virginity occasioned a whole mode of mystification. It was reified: converted to a grab bag of values."[44] This grab bag of values came together in the figure of the Virgin Mary: pure, chaste, unbroken, seamless, virgin and mother. This woman is women defined only in her sexuality and only her sexuality in relation to man's obsession with himself. Hence, the perfect woman was infinitely manipulable, as well as unobtainable; always present, but not; and absolutely stable. The stable center of her definition is virginity, the physical presence of the hymen.

The understanding of the Virgin Mary as the ideal woman changed over time. Her virginity never became unimportant, but there was a shift in emphasis to her role as mediator between humanity and divinity. Mary became, almost, a goddess. Her divinity was viewed strictly in terms of her relationship to male divinity: Bride of Christ, Mother of God. Participating as she did in the divine, she became less a model to follow and more a figure to whom humans would turn when in need.[45]

This elevation of the Virgin Mary to the near status of a goddess was, as Shahar notes, "not accompanied by elevation of the practical status of women in general, or even of the nun within the religious community."[46] Indeed, it may be that her elevation had a negative effect on women. The consolidation and centralization of religious control which accompanied her elevation closed off possibilities for women. Bynum notes that religious women of the thirteenth century were increasingly being seen "as an alternative to and a criticism of wealth, power and office."[47] Women's status as critics depended, however, on their exclusion from wealth, power and office. Derek Brewer says that "another strange aspect of the dichotomy between official and unofficial cultures was that it was also a sexual dichotomy."48 Men, and the masculine, constituted the official culture; women and the feminine were part of the unofficial culture. The Virgin Mary's importance in the official culture may indicate either an assimilation of the feminine to the official culture, or the locus of conflict between the two.

The two aspects of the Virgin Mary described above, model and mediator, are but two aspects of an ever-changing ideal. These two are neither mutually exclusive nor confined to the historical period in which they arose. One way of considering the conjunctions between the Second Nun's Tale and the Prioress's Tale is in terms of the understanding of the Virgin Mary reflected in each. The Second Nun's Tale reflects the earlier idealization of Mary as a model to be followed: virginity as a source of strength, submission to the will of God, and the miraculous paradox of virginity engendering fertility.

The Second Nun's Tale is the legend of a Roman martyr of the third century, St. Cecilie. The story, in brief, is of a young, well-born Roman noblewoman who, although she has chosen Christian virginity, is forced to marry. She converts her husband Valerian on her wedding night, in part by threatening him with the vengeance of her guardian angel, should he touch her, "or love in vileynye" (156), and, in part, through the grace of God: "Valerian, corrected as God wolde" (162). Through Valerian's request to God, Cecilie's teaching, and the grace of God, Valerian's brother Tiburce is also converted. Many wonders follow before the brothers are given the choice by the Roman prefect, Almachius, either to sacrifice to the Roman gods or die. They die: "Hir soules wenten to the Kyng of grace" (399). Almachius sends for Cecilie to give her the same choice of sacrifice to the pagan gods or death. She converts those sent to bring her to Almachius, but Cecilie is finally brought before him. The judicial debate between St. Cecilie and Almachius results in St. Cecilie's spiritual victory and Almachius' earthly victory. Almachius orders, "Brenne hire right in a bath of flambes rede" (515). Miraculously, St. Cecilie stays "al coold" (521), leading Almachius to send a messenger to slay her by "Thre strokes in the nekke" (526). She survives three days, bleeding, "with hir nekke ycorven" (533), teaching the faith. On St. Cecilie's request, St. Urban buries her body with other saints, and her home becomes the church of St. Cecilie.

The _Second Nun's Tale_, like the _Prioress's Tale_, is among the works that Chaucer does not repudiate in his Retraction. It does not "sownen into synne" (Retraction, l. 1086). Although not mentioned specifically, it would seem to fall into the category of works that leads to grace and salvation: "But of the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun,/ that thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene" (Retraction, l. 1088-89). Like the Prioress's Tale, the Clerk's Tale, and the Physician's Tale, the Second Nun's Tale is composed in rhyme royal.

The genre of the Second Nun's Tale is hagiography, a field which is large, complex, and fraught with controversy. Hagiography is studied in a variety of academic disciplines, giving rise to problems of definition, typology, and methodology.[49] The commentators' varied religious positions add further controversy.[50] In literary studies, it is an underrated, often neglected genre which tends not to engage the modern reader as literature.[51] Nevertheless, hagiography was enduringly popular throughout the medieval period.[52] As an example of the genre of hagiography, the Second Nun's Tale is "generally recognized as the best-narrated example of a saint's life in Middle English poetry."[53]

For our purposes, it may be sufficient to approach hagiography from a slightly abstruse angle, the angle of the Second Nun's Prologue. The Second Nun's Prologue contains, as does the Prioress's, an invocation to the Virgin Mary. Compared to the Second Nun's invocation, the Prioress's is very short, and unlike the Second Nun, the Prioress invokes the Lord first. Interestingly enough, the emphasis in each tale is a shift away from that indicated in each prologue. In the Prioress's Tale, the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God. She assumes the role of divinity, though as mediating demi-goddess. In the Second Nun's Tale, she is absent from the narrative, except as an implicit model.

Another way of putting this difference between the tales is in terms of the narratives of each. In the Prioress's Prologue, the Virgin Mary is relatively briefly invoked. In her tale, however, the Virgin Mary functions in the narrative as an agent. It is the praise which the little clergeon offers to her which sets the plot in motion, and her miracle which sustains and ends it. Speaking in the context of the anti-Semitism of the Prioress's Tale, an aspect of the tale which will be addressed, John Archer speaks of the "glorification of the Virgin Mary" which occurs in the tale.[54]

In contrast, the Virgin Mary is wholly absent from the Second Nun's Tale, though very prominent in her prologue. Although her prominence in the prologue is temporally distanced from the narrative of the legend, it also makes her, to borrow a popular metaphor, the background against which we read the legend.[55] One way of explaining the discrepancy between the importance of the Virgin Mary in the prologue compared to her absence in the tale is by way of historical disjunction. The legend of St. Cecilie was established prior to the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary. Only later was the Virgin Mary constructed as the embodiment, or disembodiment, of the virgin ideal. Hence, the invocation to Mary in the Second Nun's Prologue may be regarded as a later and disjunctive graft on to the legend, one which re-contextualizes it.[56]

The disjunction between the prologue and tale is less severe than it might have been. Marina Warner admirably notes and explains that the legends of martyrs had changed focus by the tenth century "from the defense of faith to the defense of virginity." Warner continues:

> [T]he Christian struggle for perfection was no longer intelligible as a struggle against the authorities without. The Church had long ago triumphed throughout the known world. Christian struggle now concentrated on the enemy within.[57]

It might not be quite accurate to say that the Church had "triumphed throughout the known world;" better perhaps to say that its borders were in the process of being defined. The legends do, however, change in their narrative focus. In the Chaucerian version of the legend of St. Cecilie, the refusal to worship pagan gods is still an important narrative link. It precipitates the martyrdom. The first emphasis of the tale, however, is St. Cecilie's virginity. Thus, although the Virgin Mary is absent from the narrative, the connection between her and St. Cecilie is the emphasis on virginity.

Sherry Reames, in her study of the sources of the legend of St. Cecilie and the Chaucerian version, notes a disturbing trend in the re-telling of the legend. Reames explains that Jacobus de Voragine

> radically altered its [the legend's] implications by emphasizing supernatural power at the expense of human understanding and choice; when Chaucer retold it, a century later, he went even further than Jacobus in eliminating the material which in the Passio had affirmed the value of human nature and earthly experience.[58]

Reames explains that the changes made by Jacobus de Voragine and continued by Chaucer decrease the involvement of the understanding and will of the converts in their own conversions. Conversion becomes miraculous, "a phenomenon altogether separate from the ordinary, intelligible processes of human deliberation and consent."[59] St. Cecilie's converts are not shown converting because of knowledge or love; they are converted by an outside and inexplicable force. Furthermore, Reames argues that the deletion of the achievements of St. Cecilie's converts is similarly cut short with similar effects:

> Whereas the saints of the Passio were called only to renounce worldly loves, those of the tale act out, in effect, a total renunciation of themselves -- laying down at God's call not only their worship of idols but their belief that there are things worth doing in this life, not only their

> sexual potential but their potential for understanding and choosing, not only their lives but their very identities.[60]

The result of these changes is that the ideal of perfection moves from growth to renunciation; that is, Chaucer, like Jacobus de Voragine, "may also have been inclined to visualize grace as abolishing nature, not raising and perfecting it."[61]

Ruth Waterhouse compares Chaucer's retelling of the legend of St. Cecilie with Aelfric's retelling of the legend, and she notices the same changes. St. Cecilie's converts and their conversions are pared down to the simple fact that they were converted. Waterhouse suggests, however, that this may have been done "in order to place more stress on Cecilia herself, particularly on her interview with Almachius and her final tortures."[62] The differences that Waterhouse finds significant between the two versions center more on the "cumulative effect suggestive of quite distinctive modes of presentation."[63] Chaucer's use of details seems to appeal more to our senses. As Waterhouse says, "Chaucer through the Second Nun sets out to create the more immediate impact, sometimes by means of greater particularity which may be combined with an appeal to the senses, sometimes by means of blatant sensationalism."[64] Chaucer's description of the garlands or his description of St. Cecilie's martyrdom are but two prominent examples.

There are other ways of understanding the changes in the Chaucerian version of the legend. Paul Beichner, for instance, sees the changes as improving the dramatic effect of the tale, while Ann Eggebroten suggests that "the theme of Cecilia's perfection and fruitfulness through spiritual and physical chastity is heightened by the laughable imperfections of Valerian, Tiburce, and finally Almachius."[65] These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they point to a new religious perception being directed at older religious materials. Another possibility is that the changes are an attempt to overlay the ideal of the legend with the ideal of the Virgin Mary current at the time of its writing. The changes are effected through the stability of virginity.

The relationship between divinity and humanity is different in the prologue than it is in the legend. In the legend, divinity has direct contact with St. Cecilie and her converts. Angels appear with great regularity. St. Cecilie and Valerian receive the two mystical crowns of red and white, of roses and lilies, of martyrdom and virginity. After their martyrdom, the souls of Valerian and Tiburce go to heaven accompanied by angels. Waterhouse points out, too, that these details all seem to happen at a literal level. The roses and lilies are literal flowers as well as symbols of martyrdom and virginity.[66] The angel that appears to St. Cecilie and Valerian is literally present.

As well, St. Cecilie actively and aggressively bears witness of and to God through her conversions, her preaching, her day in court, and finally, her martyrdom which enables her to escape the world and achieve eternal life.

It is probably of no little significance that all the divine beings of the legend are male: from God to Jesus to the angels. And all the humans, except St. Cecilie, are also male. St. Cecilie operates not only in a masculine world, but in a male world. The focus on her as the agent of divine intervention entails an emphasis on her qualifications for this role, an emphasis, that is, on her virginity. It is her virginity as a female that allows her to be in contact with divinity. Interestingly enough, Derek Brewer notes that about the middle of the fourteenth century, "the 'sex' of angels in general came to be represented as feminine."[67] By this time, too, contact with heaven was less direct and far less regular. It also tended to take a more private form. Virginity was perceived as the avenue through which contact had been made with the divine by the earlier martyrs, and it remained a viable avenue. Martyrdom, however, had ceased to be the divine sign by which God accepted virginity. It was neither a fate to be embraced nor even a viable option.

The prologue to the _Second Nun's Tale_ is a kind of mediation between the time of the tale and the time of the telling of the tale. The Virgin Mary is, in the prologue, the mediator _par excellence_. The teller of the tale invokes

Mary as: "confort of us wrecches" (32); "hir lyves leche" (56); and "myn advocat" (68). The last description points to the increasingly juridical structure of both the Church and heaven. The speaker of the tale also asks the Virgin Mary to "accepte my bileve" (63). The distance between the speaker and the Virgin Mary is indicated by the references to the human self as one of "us wrecches" (32); "Me, flemed wrecche" (58); "my soule in prison" (71); "the contagioun/Of my body" (72-73); and "I, unworthy sone of Eve" (62). Mary, here, functions as the divine; God is noticeably absent and Jesus's importance is in relation to Mary.

The last reference to the self as a "sone of Eve" has provoked some controversy as to whether the speaker could be the Second Nun, that is, whether the speaker could be a female. Except for this one epithet, there is nothing in the Prologue to indicate whether the speaker is female or male. Robinson suggests that this phrase is appropriate to a woman because it is "a phrase of the liturgy regularly sung by the nuns."[68] Vern Bullough, in a different context, gives two intriguing quotations on sons of Eve. The first is from St. Jerome: "But if she serves Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man." The second quotation is from St. Ambrose: "She then does without worldly name, gender of body, youthful seductiveness, and garrulousness of old age."[69] Women may become sons of Eve by denying their femaleness, and in doing so, they become not-woman. In other words, they become men.

Among many other things, one may note that the loss of the female body in these quotations presents interesting thoughts pertaining to representation in literature. The absence of the female body may acquire a special significance in literature when placed in this frame of reference. To give an example, the traces of the body of the Second Nun which are suggested in the General Prologue may be significant. The relative absence of her body, or the code by which absence operates, might speak as loudly as the dress code of the other two pilgrims.

While there may be traces of the body of the Second Nun in the General Prologue, there are no such traces in her prologue or tale. The trace that remains in the prologue to the tale is the trace of a male body, that is, the body may be either male or female; it is an ungendered body. The code of absence, however, makes the male body in this context, insignificant. The analogy with the word "man" is particularly apt; man is taken to include women, in this as in other matters.

In any case, one should note that the bodies of both the Virgin Mary in the prologue to the tale and of St. Cecilie in the legend are very important elements. The two are structurally bound together because of the virginity of their bodies, because of the physical presence of the hymen. St. Cecilie is "mayde and martyr" (28). These are her distinguishing marks, and they are echoed in the Virgin Mary who is "Mayde and Mooder" (36). The movement of both the prologue and the tale is to invest significance in the body of each as virgin, and to show how the use of virginity in leading to mother or martyr divests each of them of their bodies. Given that the body, here, is a source of contagion, the correct use of the body in order to get rid of it is a movement in the right direction. It needs to be said again, however, that this is the female body. The simple dichotomy of body and spirit does not describe the change. The female body must become first, an ungendered body, a man, and then, move toward the spiritual plane via her ability to change from the female to the male body. In other words, where the male body has two stages , which may be crudely defined as body followed by spirit, the female body has three, female body to male body to female spirit. She enters the last stage by virtue of her prior qualification in having passed through the first.

We have here what appears to be two irreconcilable aspects of the representation of ideal women. On the one hand, there is the virtual absence of the Second Nun in the General Prologue, connected with or perhaps disconnected from the absence of the female body of the speaker of the prologue and tale. Along with this, there is the absence of the Virgin Mary in the legend itself, certainly connected to the absence of the prologue, less certainly to the Second Nun. With regard to the speaker of the prologue and tale, the absence is accompanied by a denigration of the body. On the other hand, the body is very important to the glorification of virginity, for both the Virgin Mary and St. Cecilie. Submission to the will of God as to the use of the body leads again to the glorification of the female body: Mary's motherhood and St. Cecilie's martyrdom. It may be noted that although motherhood and martyrdom are structurally paralleled, they are by no means equal. Nevertheless, both are seen to issue from virginity; and virginity is the link between them that remains of paramount importance. The antithesis between the body and the soul or spirit, an important medieval religious concept, will not quite resolve the problem since the spiritual ideal here involves not the loss of the body, but the glorification of the virginal body.

There are many ways of attempting to reconcile these representations. Derek Brewer suggests that we recognize a division of the "feminine image" according to official and unofficial, and according to positive and negative representations. Examples of the official and positive image are the Virgin Mary and St. Cecilie. The Wife of Bath is an example of the official and negative image.[70] Although this is an astute suggestion, it leaves the problem of non-representation, or the absence of representation, unnoticed and unexplained.

Another possibility of reconciliation is the Ave-Eva dichotomy and myth. Unfortunately, both sides of this dichotomy are fully, bodily represented. Insofar as there can be bodies in literature, the Wife of Bath, for instance, is as much physically represented as is, say, St. Cecilie. There are differences in the meaning of each physical representation, but neither is bodily absent. There is, however, a difference in characterization or individualization. St. Cecilie is almost as characterless as is the Second Nun, whereas the character, the individualization of the Wife of Bath has engendered an enormous amount of speculation and discussion. In being almost characterless, St. Cecilie follows the typology of the hero in hagiography as described by Regis Boyer. Boyer says that:

> the hero, the saint, has to be idealized. This principle explains the indifference towards his physical nature. What we have to deal with is types, not individual or individualized personalities. And the presentation of a function assumed by a person who represents this type is far more important to the authors than the cut of his biography. [71]

It hardly needs to be pointed out that the saint's physical nature is not treated indifferently when the saint is a female. When the saint is a female, virginity is an almost essential requirement.

Yet another possibility is that the dynamics of the representation of the ideal woman, since it depends on representing and glorifying her body in order then to get rid of it, never truly approaches the ideal according to which the body becomes absent in the spirit. The female body must be re-asserted at the spiritual level if the gendering is not to be lost. Given that the gendering occurs at the level of the body, in the physical presence of the hymen, the female body must be attached to the spirit. The cycle of female body, male body, female spirit, involves convolutions at both the ideological and representational level.

Carolyn P. Collette suggests another possibility. She argues that the theme of the legend is "that the apparent is not always the real."[72] The imagery of blindness and sight is an obvious contribution to this theme. Moreover, Collette says:

> Seinte Cecile's name, apparently a _thing_, is in reality a _sign_ whose explication demonstrates a proper Christian attitude, for it looks beyond the apparent to the real. . . . The attitude with which one regards the name alone matters; as both Chaucer and the Second Nun know, the letter kills, but the spirit saves.[73]

This is perhaps as satisfactory an answer as any. The emphasis on the female body, when the ideal is involved, is simply shifted to the level of a symbol. The presence of the female body becomes absent in the symbol of the female body, and the apparent sleight of hand, as it were, is lost in the real.

One might say, then, that the female body becomes absent through assimilation to the symbol. This assimilation requires a drastic simplification and reduction of the female body to that part which signifies in the symbol. Virginity, the hymen, is the concrete image, and however abstract the quality it is taken to stand for, it is inevitably attached to the female body. Theologically, however, it must be detached from the female body, and it is, apparently. The miracle of the virgin birth and the miracle of martyrdom are assimilated to the will of God, and at the more prosaic level of the prologue, to busyness.

Furthermore, as Collette says, the letter is assimilated to the spirit, the names are assimilated to the symbolic level. The Virgin Mary, already a symbol, is invoked as a symbol, while St. Cecilie, through the etymology of her name with which the prologue ends, is made into a symbol. The slippage between the apparent physical body and the reality of the symbol is inevitable, and probably necessary. The two come together in virginity, the physical presence of the hymen. Johan Huizinga speaks of symbols this way when he says, "Symbolic assimilation founded on common properties presupposes the idea that these properties are essential to things." Huizinga explains:

> Instead of looking for the relation between things

> by following the hidden detours of their causal connections, thought makes a leap and discovers their relation, not in a connection of cause or effects, but in a connection of signification or finality.[74]

In the gap, the leap of thought, we may discern the absent female body. All that remains of her is her signification, her virginity.

Symbolism, if it is to work, must connect two terms into a third term.[75] It works, that is, in a hierarchy since the connecting third term is the essential similarity. Everything that does not fit into the third term is abandoned as non-essential. Among other things, the red roses of St. Cecilie's garland are so abandoned in the signification of her name. Huizinga notes that the redness of roses symbolizes "the blood of the martyrs."[76] In the sign-making of St. Cecilie's name, red roses are abandoned in favor of fire, the fire that burns: "brennynge evere in charite ful brighte" (118). The dominant element of her etymology is virginity: whiteness, clarity, fire, brightness, light, lilies, and purity. Fire is the single element here that might connect with redness or martyrdom, but it is used in the prologue rather in its associations with light; just as "hevene is swift and round and eek brennynge,/ Right so was faire Cecilie the white" (114-15). Her bloody martyrdom is obscured in the sign-making.[77]

Another way of looking at the connection between the prologue and the tale is that the prologue not only recontextualizes the tale; the prologue assimilates the tale.

It is to be noted that the speaker of the prologue does not advocate virginity. The speaker advocates "feithful bisynesse" (24), as opposed to idleness. Faithful busyness involves not being a virgin but focusing on the virgins, on virginity. The speaker seems to preclude virginity as a possibility: the soul is in prison, the body is a "contagioun" (71-2). Virginity, as signified in both the Virgin Mary and St. Cecilie, is, for the speaker, valued as a symbolic rather than a physical possibility.

Because virginity functions symbolically for the speaker of the prologue and tale, the speaker need not be the Second Nun, need not be a virgin. Of course, the speaker could be the Second Nun. It is possible that the elevation of virginity, of virgins, to the symbolic level makes virginity at the physical level, if not irrelevant, certainly less important. Physical virginity might no longer be seen to lead to the all-important symbolic virginity. In addition, for both the Virgin Mary and St. Cecilie the symbolic level of the meaning of virginity acquires its significance in retrospect. In the later Middle Ages, when martyrdom was not a viable alternative, and with "the wighte/ Of erthely lust and fals affeccioun" (73-4), the virgin of the speaker's present may not have found physical virginity to be a guarantee of divine grace.

Critical attempts to link the Second Nun of the General Prologue to the speaker of the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* have been noticeably restrained. Carolyn Collette, a rare exception, says in a footnote that her interpretation is "concerned with Chaucer's thematic intent," and hence, "ignores the great deal that can be said about the character of the narrator and her relation to the material."[78] George L. Engelhardt is an even rarer exception in his comment, "Thus the tales told by each of the women in the pilgrimage -- the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun -- are fantasies in which they project the character they fancy for themselves."[79]

In order to make the connection, both Collette and Engelhardt introduce the category of character, a category which I have suggested is significant to the Second Nun because of its absence. The most immediate way in which the Second Nun is connected to her prologue and tale is by function. She is a witness-companion to the Prioress, just as St. Cecilie is a witness-companion, by the context of the prologue, to the Virgin Mary. One might note that in the religious hierarchy of the period, St. Cecilie is subordinated to the Virgin Mary in a way that is analogous to the Second Nun's subordination to the Prioress.[80] The connection cannot be pushed too far, since it depends on an analogy rather than a direct connection. In neither part of the analogy is character particularly relevant.

Gender, however, is relevant. The Second Nun must be female to be a satisfactory witness to the Prioress, and the Virgin Mary and St. Cecilie are structurally connected by their virginity, an aspect stressed in the Prologue. The relation of character to the represented presence of the female body, or the comparative absence thereof requires further investigation. It may be concluded here that a trace of the female body must remain; otherwise, the body or spirit will be considered, by default, to be male. Since women were, in the Middle Ages, as we are today, defined largely in terms of the body and the use of the body in relation to men, this is hardly a surprising conclusion. It is still grammatically true that an unspecified body is male, only a gendered body is female. Within this context, absence becomes extremely complicated, but the absence of the female body must depend on its presence. Displacement of the body by the spirit is true only for the ungendered body, not for the female body.

Chapter II: Notes

[1] An early example of the focus on the Wife of Bath and the Prioress as the only women pilgrims may be found in William Blake's comment (1809): "The characters of Women Chaucer has divided into two classes, the Lady Prioress and the Wife of Bath. Are not these leaders of the ages of men? The Lady Prioress, in some ages, predominates; and in some the Wife of Bath, in whose character Chaucer has been equally minute and exact," in *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, Derek Brewer (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 256. More recent examples might include: Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterization of Women," in *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Criticism*, ed. G. Economou, Contemporary Studies in Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 93-110; and Robert W. Hanning, "From *Eva* and *Ave*," 580-99.

[2] E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), p.62.

[3] Golden hair and small, round breasts are two details of the conventional description of what D. S. Brewer calls "the ideal of feminine beauty." Chaucer uses these two details, and many others, to describe White in the *Book of the Duchess*, l. 858, 956. See D. S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature," 257-69.

[4] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Granada, 1978 [1929]), p. 43.

[5] Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c1275 to 1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 214-15; I am indebted to this study for the information which follows. For a discussion of the resistance to and problems of new, independent female orders, see Brenda Bolton, "Mulieres sanctae," in *Sanctity and Secularity: The Church and the World*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), pp. 77-95. For a discussion of the decline of Benedictine monasteries, see Stephanus Hilpisch, *History of Benedictine Nuns*, trans. Sister M. Joanne Muggli (Collegeville, MN.: St. John's Abbey Press, 1958), Chapter 5, "Decline and Reform," pp. 46-60. The declining numbers of women entering monasteries may have been caused by a number of factors: increasing urbanization and secularization, the reform movement in the Church along with the resistance to

new monastic orders for women, and the gradual erosion of meaningful activities for nuns. The history of women's religious expression seems to have taken a very different course on the continent.

[6] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, pp. 1-3. There is some variation on the numbers of monasteries and the numbers of nuns. Power, Medieval Women, pp. 89-99, sets the outside limit at 136 monasteries, not including 10 Gilbertine monasteries, and at no more than 3,500 nuns, c.1350 (p. 89). I have used the fuller study throughout. Stephanus Hilpisch, notes, "About 1500, there were still 84 Benedictine convents in England with 850 nuns. Most of the houses were small priories; only 12 were considered wealthy convents" (pp. 59-60). These figures may be compared with the situation in Germany a hundred years earlier, as noted by Friedrich Heer, The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350, trans. Janet Sondheimer (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), who says, "Around the year 1250 there were some five hundred nunneries in Germany, with a total population of between twenty-five and thirty thousand religious" (pp. 263-64).

[7] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, pp. 262-74, for restrictions. Power also discusses women's education more generally in Medieval Women, pp. 76-88. Casey, "Women in Norman and Plantagenet England," agrees with Power's assessment and directs the reader to further works on women's education in the medieval period (pp. 92-3).

[8] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, p. 260.

[9] On the achievements of Anglo-Saxon nuns, see Emily James Putnam, The Lady: Studies of Certain Significant Phases of Her History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 [1910]), pp. 69-105; Lina Eckenstein, Women Under Monasticism (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1963 [1896]); and Susan Mosher Stuard, "Introduction," in Women in Medieval Society, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (n.p.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976). The achievements of Anglo-Saxon nuns, and the high esteem in which they were held, is generally agreed on. For a brief overview of the status of Anglo-Saxon women, see Doris M. Stenton, The English Woman in History (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957), pp. 1-28.

[10] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, p. 289.

[11] Robinson, p. 655.

[12] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, p. 62-63.

[13] Christopher Brooke, Monasteries of the World: The Rise and Development of the Monastic Tradition (Hertfordshire: Omega Books, 1974), comments regarding women's prayers: "there were a number of reasons, sensible and absurd, for supposing their prayers less efficacious than those of men" (p. 168). This cultural denigration of women's religious expression was in addition to prohibitions against singing the mass, preaching, and dispensing the Eucharist. Joan Morris, The Lady Was a Bishop (New York: Macmillan, 1973), traces the gradual implementation of restrictions and prohibitions on the power and authority of abbesses who were, originally, quasi-episcopal. The abbess of Las Huelgas in Spain was the last to lose her quasi-episcopal status. She held it from 1188 until 1874. For an overview of the restrictions placed on women religious, see S. Shahar, pp. 22-23; and Clara Maria Henning, "Canon Law and the Battle of the Sexes," in Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 267-91.

[14] The Romance of the Rose, by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, trans. into English verse Harry W. Robbins; trans. into English Florence L. Robbins, ed. Charles W. Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), Chapter 62, "The Duenna tells Fair Welcome how women gain men's love," ll. 100-126, p. 280.

[15] Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the "General Prologue" to the "Canterbury Tales" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 129.

[16] Sister Mary Byrne, The Traditions of the Nun in Medieval England (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America, 1932), p. 182.

[17] Sister Byrne notes that "the ideal nun-figure presented in the De Laudibus Virginitatis of Aldhelm, written at the close of the seventh or in the early eighth century, persists intact and with the acquisition of very few additions throughout the entire period [the seventh to the sixteenth century]" (p. 62). The counterpart of the simple nun was the abbess, drawn largely from the Historia Ecclesiastica of Bede. See Sister Byrne, pp. 73-110.

[18] Sister Byrne, pp. 41-42.

[19] Sister Byrne, pp. 56-57.

[20] Alfred David, The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 6.

[21] Sister Byrne, p. 173.

[22] Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 69.

[23] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 35.

[24] Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1985 [1976]), p. 67.

[25] On the Virgin Mary as a model, see: Sister Byrne, who says that in the writers who, following Aldhelm, consolidated the ideal of the simple nun, "The Blessed Virgin is consistently given, as in Aldhelm, as the supreme model" (p. 53); Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 87; and Warner, p. 77.

[26] Weinstein and Bell, especially pp. 220-38. See, also, Michael Goodich, "Contours of Female Piety in Later Medieval Hagiography," *Church History*, 50 (1981), 20-32.

[27] The status of the Virgin Mary in the medieval religious hierarchy is exemplified in Chaucer's prayer in the Retraction: "that thanke I oure Lorde Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and all the seintes of hevene" (1089). Stephen Wilson, Introduction, *Saints and their Cults*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), says, "Worship proper (*latria*) was due to God alone; the saints were to receive only veneration (*dulia*); while the Virgin Mary was to be honoured with *hyperdulia*" (p. 4).

[28] Caroline Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," *Women's Studies*, Vol. 11, nos. 1 & 2 (1984), 188. Goodich makes a similar observation: "Mystical union with God was often accomplished through several stages which stressed the human character of Jesus as expressed in the devotion to the Infant Jesus, the Sacred Heart and the Eucharist" (30).

[29] Once again, the male is understood as including the female. Weinstein and Bell describe two types of saints in the period of their study: a masculine type and an androgynous type. Both men and women fall into the latter category; only men fall into the former. Weinstein and Bell also note that the saintly ideal of the thirteenth through to the fifteenth century tended towards the androgynous type (pp. 237-38). Accordingly, the number of women who attained sainthood was unusually high during this period, reaching a peak of 27.7 percent in the fifteenth century (for the

thirteenth century, 22.6 percent; for the fourteenth century, 23.4 percent). These figures should be understood in relation to the overall percentage of women saints between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, that is, 17.5 percent. Wilson suggests, "The imbalance is to a considerable extent offset by the importance of devotion to the various manifestations of the Virgin Mary, but nevertheless remains a bias of very great significance, the more so in that women seem always to have participated fully in saints' cults, and that in modern European peasant societies, at least, religion is something of a female specialty" (p. 37). Wilson's masculinist bias is showing here in a variety of ways. See Weinstein and Bell, Chapter 8, "Men and Women," pp. 220-38, for further discussion of the statistical and conceptual intricacies. Goodich notes that women saints investigated for unorthodox beliefs "apparently escaped the onus of heresy for the following reasons: 1) they lived in cloisters under a modified rule . . . 2) they finally accepted the direction of a recognized male religious order; and 3) they denounced heresy. . . . Socially they seem to have come from a higher class than their heretical sisters, who emphasized the total equality of believers, including women, and refused to accept the authority of a male-dominated church" (32). It would seem that the human or androgynous model was male in more ways than one.

[30] The increasing importance of the anchoress in England is one manifestation of these possibilities. Désirée Hirst, "The Catholic Concept of the Feminine," in *Women, Literature, Criticism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1978), pp. 60-71, develops the argument more fully. In addition to suggesting the importance of direct contact with divinity, she notes the introduction of the idea of Jesus as Mother in Juliana of Norwich, and the tendency to feminize the Holy Spirit (pp. 68-69).

[31] In Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines, eds., *Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1973), p. 141.

[32] Ann S. Haskell, "The Portrayal of Women by Chaucer and His Age," in *What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature*, ed. Marlene Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 6.

[33] Sister Byrne, speaking of the tradition of the simple nun figure, comments that by the time of "the Middle English mystic-ascetic literature, many of the detailed elaborations of the *De Laudibus Virginitatis* are dropped. Virginity alone of the time-honored points is left. From now on the sublimity, the superiority of virginity, the

means of preserving it, its heavenly reward are emphasized even more than in the past" (p. 63).

[34] Marc Glasser, "Marriage in Medieval Hagiography," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, IV (1981), 3-34, remarks on the difference in the conception of marriage between the late medieval period when marriage was increasingly viewed as a "meritorious relationship" (23), with the emphasis on "the significance of the relationship of the saint to his or her spouse, children, and social community" (24); and the early legends which tended to be either anti-matrimonial or anti-sexual (15). Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Heroines and Hysterics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), suggests that women in the early Christian period, especially martyrs, were often seeking solutions to problems in this life, not only "with attaining perfection in the next" (58). "We may regret," she continues, "that these men [the Church Fathers] did not also wish to realize how Christianity in its earlier stages also met a social need of releasing women from the hierarchical structure imposed by patriarchal society, which the church in its own organization would increasingly incorporate and emulate" (p. 58).

[35] Duby, p. 282. Duby's preferred terms are those of his title: knights and priests. His disclaimers notwithstanding, the lady of his title is no more than a filler between the Knight and the Priest, who remain the focus of his attention. See Christine Fauré, "Absent from History," trans. and introd. Lillian S. Robinson, *Signs*, 7 (1981), 68-80; and Susan Mosher Stuard's reply to Fauré, "The Annales School and Feminist History: Opening Dialogue with the American Stepchild," *Signs*, 7 (1981), 135-43; and Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Clio's European Daughters: Myopic Modes of Perception," in *The Prism of Sex: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Julia A. Sherman and Evelyn Torton Beck (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 33-53; for feminist critiques of this kind of historical approach and the implications for the history of women. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), sees the same conflict in the early Christian period as Duby sees in the later period: a conflict between the church and the aristocracy. Brown, however, sees it as a conflict between the family and the church community (p. 31). He says, "It is far from certain that what we have been calling, for the sake of convenience, 'the rise of the cult of the saints' in the late fourth century was any more than the vigorous appropriation of this cult by the bishops and the ruling classes of the Roman Empire" (p. 33). Women's part in this conflict should be understood keeping in mind the fact that women and the poor were *not* citizens; they were, however, part of the community in Christian

terms, and some women were powerful members indeed (p. 44-47). See, also, note 34 above.

[36] One of the well-known metaphors for expressing this hierarchy was taken from Matthew 13: 8 and 23 (King James Version), the parable of the the sower: "But other [seeds] fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold" (13: 8). The text was glossed as indicating the rewards of heaven: for the wife thirtyfold, for the widow sixty, and for the virgin an hundredfold. Sister Byrne comments that this metaphor was so common in didactic literature that "[a] mere allusion to the 'hundredfold' . . . suffices, consequently, to suggest the whole tradition and to conjure up the presence of the ideal nun as pictured therein" (p. 65). For the use of this metaphor in *Piers Plowman* to indicate grades of perfection, see the argument of Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Piers Plowman* and the Three Grades of Chastity," *Anglia*, 76 (1958), 227-53.

[37] As paraphrased by Shahar, p. 27.

[38] Weinstein and Bell, p. 87.

[39] Birte Carlé, "Structural Patterns in the Legends of the Holy Women of Christianity," in *Aspects of Female Existence*, Proceedings from The St. Gertrud Symposium "Women in the Middle Ages," Copenhagen, September 1978, ed. Birte Carlé *et al* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1980), pp. 79-86 is a short study of the ideal of virginity as a source of power for women. A longer study is Anne Llewellyn Barstow's *Joan of Arc: Heretic, Mystic, Shaman*, Studies in Women and Religion, Vol. 17 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986).

[40] Weinstein and Bell, p. 73.

[41] Warner, p. 72.

[42] Warner, p. 73.

[43] Shahar, p. 23. The idea comes from Eve's part in the Fall from Paradise. See also John A. Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), Chapter 5, "The Devil's Gateway," pp. 55-78. The "porter at the gate" is a related metaphor of great importance in the medieval period. It is to be found in the *Roman de la Rose* in the figure of Lady Idleness, and significantly, in the prologue to the *Second Nun's Tale*, l. 1-3. Paul M. Clogan, "The Figural Style and Meaning of *The Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale*," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 3 (1972), New Series, notes Chaucer's use of the metaphor: "in the *Knight's Tale* (A1940) and again in the *Parson's Tale* (I714)" (219).

[44] O'Faolain and Martines, p. 137.

[45] The importance of the Virgin Mary as an intercessor or mediator between humanity and divinity during the later Middle Ages is, almost, a commonplace. See, for instance, Shahar, p. 24; Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady & The Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 71, who argues, also, that neither the Virgin Mary nor the saints were role-models (but see note 25 above); and Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, pp. 513-14. The best-known example of the Virgin Mary as mediator in Chaucer's works is "An A B C." For the Virgin Mary as *interventrix* in her role as mother, see Alexander Weiss, *Chaucer's Native Heritage*, American University Studies Series IV, English Language and Literature Vol. 11 (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), who says~~,~~ "For, to carry the familial metaphor a step further, just as the earthly mother frequently stands between the wrath of the father and the erring child, so the Virgin, as mother, stands between the wrath of God and his erring children" (p. 132). Derek Brewer, *Chaucer In His Time* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1973 [1963]), confirms Weiss's statement in the earthly, familial sphere, saying that in Chaucer's works, "A father is clearly a formidable person, who is capable of arousing resentment as well as love and respect" (p. 70); while "[a] mother is a kinder, softer, sweeter person, more loved and less respected, who also has a scrap of joy that the father misses" (p. 70). F. R. H. Du Boulay, *An Age of Ambition: English Society in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), commenting on the significance of the Virgin Mary as an intercessor, says, "More extremely, the figure of Mary, half-mother, half-intercessor, might seem in an age of rare suicide an alternative to despair itself" (p. 151). Kathleen Casey, "The Cheshire Cat," says, "Long an enriched symbol of the Great Mother or the mystery at Eleusis, Mary now became Queen not only of the chivalric courts of Heaven but also the quality of mercy itself; pacifier of city strife and agent of repentance. She stood for women who were expected to soothe all tensions, save their own" (240). On the figure of the mother, see also Chapter III, note 53, below.

[46] Shahar, p. 32.

[47] Bynum, p. 195.

[48] Derek Brewer, "Gothic Chaucer," in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Derek Brewer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1975 [1974]), p. 17.

[49] Hagiography is studied under such academic disciplines as: religion, sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, folklore, and history. An earlier list of the categories under which hagiography might be studied is

provided by Paul Peeters, "Hippolyte Delehaye: A Memoir," in The Legends of the Saints, by Hippolyte Delehaye, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962 [1905]). Speaking of Fr. Delehaye's range of critical articles, Peters says that "all the disciplines pertinent to hagiographical criticism are represented: church history, general history, philology, archaeology, epigraphy, paleography, semantics, liturgy, folklore. Even canon law has a place"(p. 203).

[50] In the bibliography appended to Saints and their Cults, ed. Stephen Wilson, religious positions are a relevant aspect of the annotations, for example: Jesuit scholar, Benedictine, Bollandist, Italian Protestant, lapsed Catholic, official Catholic, and "loosely feminist" (Stephen Wilson, Annotated Bibliography, pp. 309-417).

[51] At a recent symposium entitled "Hagiography and Medieval Literature," it was noted that "the literary dimension, both hagiography considered in literary terms and the relations of saint's lives to other literary forms (apart perhaps from the exemplum) had received little attention" (from "Discussion," in Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium, eds. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al (n.p.: Odense University Press, 1981), p. 159).

[52] One may wish to define the limitations of the meaning of "popular" in this context. Evelyne Patlagean, "Ancient Byzantine hagiography and social history," trans. Jane Hodgkin, in Saints and their Cults, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 101-103, discusses the inadequacy of the term "popular" for the period of her inquiry. Many of her comments are applicable to the use of the term in any historical period: the term is inappropriate when applied to the saints or the writers of saints' lives; it cannot adequately describe the diversity of hagiographic writings; and it does not address the multiplicity of its uses in a given culture or over a given time period.

[53] Clogan, 213.

[54] John Archer, "The Structure of Anti-Semitism in the Prioress's Tale," Chaucer Review, 19 (1984-85), 46.

[55] The metaphor is notably used by Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 4 passim. My use of the metaphor in this context has, inevitably, resonances of Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 3 passim.

[56] The cult of St. Cecilia (Cecilie) became popular in

the fifth-century, and her feast is celebrated November 22. There is virtually no evidence to support her historical existence. See David H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 72-3; and M. J. Costelloe, "St. Cecilia," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (1967), J. P. Tatlock, "St. Cecilia's Garlands and Their Roman Origin," *PMLA*, 45 (1930), 169-79, discusses the origins of the legend, with special reference to the passing of the symbolism of the garlands from the pagan, Roman culture to the Christian culture. Russell A. Peck, "The Ideas of 'Entente' and Translation in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*," *Annuale Mediaevale*, 8 (1967), 17-37, also discusses the recontextualization of the tale: the prologue provides a new context emphasizing the themes of translation and idleness, Mary being "the greatest translator of all" (22); the tale's placement prior to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, as its antithesis; and its relationship to the *Parson's Tale*, "it explores in poetic terms what the Parson explores openly, once poetry has been put aside" (37). An article which arrived too late to be included in this thesis is Janemarie Luecke's "The Three Faces of Cecilia: Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*," *American Benedictine Review*, 33 (1982), 335-48. Luecke also argues for recontextualization as a way of understanding the tale. The three faces of St. Cecilia in Luecke's title refer to the Roman Cecilia; the medieval Cecilia, and the modern Cecilia.

[57] Warner, p. 70.

[58] Sherry L. Reames, "The Cecilia Legend as Chaucer Inherited It and Retold It," *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 39.

[59] Reames, 51.

[60] Reames, 54.

[61] Reames, 57.

[62] Ruth Waterhouse, "'A Rose By Any Other Name': Two Versions of the Legend of Saint Cecilia," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 79 (1978), 128.

[63] Waterhouse, 126.

[64] Waterhouse, 132.

[65] Paul E. Beichner, "Confrontation, Contempt of Court, and Chaucer's Cecilia," *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973-74), 199; and Anne Eggebroten, "Laughter in the *Second Nun's Tale*: A Redefinition of the Genre," *Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984-85), 60. I would hesitate to suggest that any of the critics mentioned here would agree with any of the others. It would be difficult, for instance, to reconcile Reames's

theological concerns with Beichner's literary concerns. Where Reames understands the cuts to imply theological pessimism, Beichner sees the cut of repetitious material.

[66] Waterhouse, 133.

[67] Brewer, "Gothic Chaucer," p. 17.

[68] Robinson, p. 755. Norman E. Eliason, "Chaucer's Second Nun?" _Modern Language Quarterly_, 3 (1942), 9-16, argues that the Second Nun is a scribal interpolation, in part basing his argument on "the incompleteness of the description of the Second Nun" (10). Granville Sydnor Hill, "The Hagiographic Narrators of Geoffrey Chaucer's _Canterbury Tales_: The Second Nun, The Man of Law, The Prioress," Diss. Rice University 1977, argues that the narrator of the _Second Nun's Tale_ is a Chaucerian narrator like Chaucer the pilgrim, or the narrator of the _Book of the Duchess_, the _Parliament of Fowls_, or the _House of Fame_ (p. 50). Like Eliason, she bases her argument, in part, on our expectations in the _Canterbury Tales_ of a realistic character, a "visible narrator" (p. 73). Mary Elizabeth Giffin, _Studies on Chaucer and His Audience_ (Hull, Que.: Les Editions <<L'Eclair>>, 1956), pp. 29-48, argues for the occasional nature of the poem, distinct from the _Canterbury Tales_.

[69] Vern L. Bullough, "Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women," _Viator_, 4 (1973), 499.

[70] Brewer, "Gothic Chaucer," pp. 17-18.

[71] Regis Boyer, "An attempt to define the typology of medieval hagiography," in _Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium_, eds. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al (n.p.: Odense University Press, 1981), p. 31, emphasis in original. On the lack of individuality, see, also the Foreword to _The Golden Legend_ of Jacobus de Voragine, trans. and adapted by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1969 [1941]), p. xi.

[72] Carolyn P. Collette, "A Closer Look at Seinte Cecile's Special Vision," _Chaucer Review_, 10 (1975-76), 337.

[73] Collette, "A Closer Look," 342, emphasis in original.

[74] Johan Huizinga, _The Waning of the Middle Ages_, trans. F. Hopman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954 [1924]), p. 203.

[75] Huizinga, p. 203 ff.

[76] Huizinga, p. 203.

[77] Chaucer is following the etymology of *The Golden Legend*. The structural counterpart to the red roses is to be found in the tale: the "flambes rede" (515); and the bloody sheets (535-6). Russell A. Peck, "The Ideas of 'Entente' and Translation," notes that the burning image of the prologue is "analogous to the tradition of Mary of the burning bush, which presents the Virgin as the container of divine fire" (24). For the argument that the fire of the prologue is related to sexuality, and for an interesting discussion of the iconography of the tale, see V. A. Kolve, "Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* and the Iconography of Saint Cecilia," in *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism*, ed. Donald M. Rose (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, Inc., 1981), pp. 137-74. Kolve focuses on St. Cecilie's martyrdom because that is the focus, "for the most part," of representations of her (p. 141). For an interesting comment on St. Cecilie's death by the sword, and the regularity of this means of death for martyrs, see Fr. Delehaye, p.72.

[78] Collette, "A Closer Look," 349, n. 9.

[79] George L. Engelhardt, "The Ecclesiastical Pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*: A Study in Ethology," *Mediaeval Studies* (Toronto), 37 (1975), 295. Since writing this, another article which deals with all three women pilgrims has come to my attention: Robert S. Sturges, "*The Canterbury Tales*' Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority," *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring 1983), 41-51.

[80] For the place of the saints in the divine hierarchy, see note 27 above. According to Wilson, "saints, moreover, were to be venerated, not in themselves but only as possible "channels of grace" from God" (p. 4).

Chapter III: The Prioress

One of the ways in which the fourth estate was subdivided during the Middle Ages was according to women's sexuality as related to men: virgin, widow, and wife. The Parson divides women this way in his remedies against "leccherie," and women were categorized this way under the law.[1] If the Prioress could be defined as a widow, the Second Nun as a virgin, and the Wife of Bath as a wife, we would have a neat paradigm for understanding the three women pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales. Unfortunately, the paradigm does not work. The Wife of Bath might be considered as either a wife or a widow, her title notwithstanding. The Prioress might be a widow or a virgin, and in the religious sense, she might be considered a wife, the bride of Christ. As with the Prioress, so too with the Second Nun: she might fit any of the categories, although the religious sense of bride is unlikely to be used in this context.

Yet another way in which the fourth estate was commonly subdivided was according to the perception of women's institutional affiliations: religious women and secular women. This paradigm holds up somewhat better. The Second Nun and the Wife of Bath are easily discernible as, respectively, a religious woman and a secular woman. Although the Prioress cannot be neatly placed in either category, it has long been recognized that her representation in the General Prologue is a curious mixture of two codes or categories more accurately designated as religious and courtly.

The priority of one or the other code is often argued in the literary interpretations of the Prioress. At the extremes, considering one or the other code as paramount leads to whole-hearted condemnation or whole-hearted admiration.[2] It does seem as though one cannot enter the discussion of the Prioress without engaging these two codes, the ways they interact, and the ways they reflect on each other. Without arguing for the priority of either code, I will argue that the Prioress is the ground on which these two codes are, in various ways, played against each other.

It is possible to construct this argument so as to conclude, as Chauncey Wood does, that: "Every sign in the portrait of the Prioress points to her worldliness -- the very antithesis of the essence of monasticism. And, as a nun who wants to be a fashionable lady she ends up being neither. She is nothing."[3] This conclusion belongs, in some ways, with the whole-hearted condemnation often accorded to the Prioress, but it goes further. The codes, in Wood's view, are not only mutually exclusive, but incapable of interaction and even antagonistic. The codes are antithetical, but rather than cancelling each other, they cancel the ground on which they are constructed, that is, the Prioress. It would seem, however, that the Prioress is precisely the ground or position at which the codes may come together, and at which both may be asserted. That the codes thereby take over or enclose the ground, the Prioress, at which they intersect seems to me to be a more palatable argument. Where Wood finds nothing, I find a steadily disappearing and enclosed point.

Of the three women pilgrims represented in the Canterbury Tales, the Prioress ranks highest in the hierarchy of the General Prologue. Of the twenty-nine pilgrims who gather at the Tabard Inn, she ranks second only to the Knight. After the description of the Knight and his entourage, we are given the description of the Prioress and her entourage, followed by the Monk. It is curious, in view of the hierarchy indicated here, that critics should say that when the Miller breaks in to tell his tale ahead of the Monk, who had been asked to tell a tale after the Knight, the Miller "subverts the social hierarchy."[4] The Prioress outranks the Monk, and she should logically have been asked to tell the second tale. Whether we assume a governing principle of organization based on the social hierarchy, that is, on degree or estate, or the hierarchy of the three estates, or even the division of the pilgrims into those who are either "gentils" or "churls," the Prioress should follow the Knight.[5]

The Prioress is not even asked to tell a tale at this point. The Host turns to the Monk for a tale, and the Miller's celebrated interruption takes place. What remains is a problem. Either the General Prologue does not reflect a hierarchical ordering of the pilgrims in placing the Prioress between the Knight and the Monk, or the hierarchy is broken as soon as the Host requests a tale of the Monk. There is some room for maneuvering the ordering the tales since the Knight as first speaker was made "by aventure, or sort, or cas" (GP, 844). Nevertheless, an order is implied when the first and highest ranking pilgrim of the General Prologue tells the first tale. Moreover, the _Knight's Tale_ is explicitly concerned with order and hierarchy. If we are to understand that the order of the General Prologue breaks down in the tales, then the second of the ordered series of tales to be broken should involve a token gesture to the Prioress, not to the Monk.

As the link between the _Knight's Tale_ and the _Miller's Tale_ stands, three different orders are implied: the order of the General Prologue; the order that places the Monk after the Knight; and the order that the Miller creates by his interruption. The disparity between the first and second order is ignored. The Host turns to the Monk as though he were following the order of the General Prologue. Placed between the Knight and the Monk in the theoretical order of the General Prologue, the Prioress is passed over in silence in the initial attempt to put that hierarchy into practice. Her rank is overlooked, and the potential insult can scarcely be said to be implied.

That the potential for conflict is overlooked in the link between the Knight's Tale and the Miller's Tale is, perhaps, reason enough for readers to overlook it. That the subversion of the order of the General Prologue occurs in order to avoid placing a woman within the practical application of that order should make our critical antennae quiver with excitement. What does it mean? One possibility is to attribute the discrepancy to the Host: his class and convictions concerning women are responsible for the subversion.[6] Another possibility, more likely, is that we are dealing with the medieval ambiguities regarding the fourth estate. In other words, the Host could not have overlooked the Prioress's rank and status, her degree, in silence unless there were cultural customs and mores which made such an omission insignificant or so common as not to require comment.

The absence of comment indicates a norm, a custom considered to be natural. To say, however, that the custom or norm depends on the ambiguities of the perception of the fourth estate is not really to explain the ambiguities. One way of explaining the silent movement from the order of the General Prologue to the order of the telling of the tales is to note that the order of the General Prologue is an order of description. The order by which the tale-telling begins is an order of speech.

The two orders or hierarchies are disjunctive when they intersect at the category of the fourth estate. Or rather, they are disjunctive because they intersect, here, at the category of woman. The effect of the disjunction is to place the Prioress between them, or in the middle. She is superficially or theoretically seen as part of the hierarchy, and she achieves her rank and status from her participation in it. The Prioress is, however, not heard as a part of the hierarchy. This exclusion undermines her rank and status. It also restricts her position as the second-ranking pilgrim to the position of the observed. Although she will later tell a tale, enter, that is, the hierarchy of speech, she will do so after the hierarchy of speech is in disarray.[7]

This pattern of participation and exclusion is also the pattern of the Prioress's portrait in the General Prologue. As has been noted above, the Prioress is placed between the Knight and the Monk in the General Prologue. The Knight, who is representative of the aristocratic class, is shown in relation to the chivalric ideal. In terms of the three estates, those who fight, those who pray, and those who work, he is of the first estate; he fights. The Monk, on the other side of the Prioress, is a member of the religious order. He is shown in relation to the monastic ideal, and he belongs to the estate who prays. In attempting to place the Prioress within an order or class, and in relation to an ideal, we encounter problems. By the courtly conventions used in describing the Prioress, she is part of the courtly or aristocratic class. She does not fight, but she is described in terms of the larger definition which includes courtliness or courtesy. As a nun, she is part of the religious order. The Prioress seems less one or the other than a transition point between the two.

In the ambiguity of her place between these two orders and ideals, the Prioress reflects the historical position of nuns in the medieval period. Women were associated with the church, but they did not fit into the church hierarchy. The highest position to which women could aspire in the church was head of a household, a position which the Prioress has likely attained. This position had previously carried great authority, responsibility, and respect, and it could still, occasionally. By this time, the late fourteenth century, women's activities were being increasingly and severely restricted, ideally to a passive observance of religious ceremonies within the enclosure of their house. Having taken religious vows, the women were, strictly speaking, no longer a part of the secular world. The most extreme formulation of this principle may be found in The Ancrene Riwle which states that an anchoress "is completely dead as far as concerns the world."[8] The more formal and less harsh vows taken by nuns on entering orders articulate a similar withdrawal from the things of this world. Nuns vowed obedience, chastity, and poverty.[9]

The Prioress, as a member of a religious order, falls outside the secular order. As Eileen Power says, however, nunneries were "essentially aristocratic institutions, the refuge of the gently born."[10] Although the daughters of the wealthy merchant class were beginning to enter nunneries by Chaucer's time, the aristocratic nature of the nunneries still remained. The custom of a dowry for a woman entering orders along with noble prerogative in placing women in the nunneries meant that they continued to be an alternative only to the upper classes, whether defined by wealth or birth. Lower class women did not have the money for a dowry, and middle class women had many other options and possibilities.[11] The long standing association of the nunneries with the aristocratic class made nuns a further anomaly in the church hierarchy. Their association with the church, concomitantly, made the nuns an anomaly in the secular order.

Fitting into neither one nor the other order, nuns were simultaneously part of both. They participated in courtly life by their dress, their property, and their activities. They participated in religious life by their devotion, prayers, and domicile. Of more consequence than their participation in the two is the problem of evaluation which the anomalous position of nuns raises. To evaluate nuns in the light of their religious position seems to indicate a condemnation of their aristocratic way of life. On the other hand, to evaluate them in the light of an aristocratic code is to ignore their religious vows. The problem is exacerbated with the Prioress because she holds a high religious position, and because, historically, the odds favor her being of good social standing by birth.[12]

The anomaly is encoded in the placement of the Prioress between the Knight and the Monk. Just as she is a transition point between the orders of the Knight and Monk, so too, the Prioress is midway between what each comes to represent. The Knight is courtly by both birth and character. The adjective most often used to describe him is "worthy," used five times. We are told that "he loved chivalrie,/ Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" (GP,45-6), and to emphasize his worthiness, that "He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght" (GP,72). In his actions and conduct, he lives up to the courtly ideal in its specifically chivalric form. He serves his feudal lord in battle as befits a good medieval knight, and he serves his heavenly Lord on the Crusades as befits a good Christian man. The Knight's wide travels and experience, his participation in the Crusades, have confirmed his worth. He is both wise and meek, courageous and prudent, courteous and dignified. He is an exemplar of the first estate, of those who fight.[13]

As Chaucer so often does, he uses external detail to exemplify the character of the Knight. His horse and his apparel bespeak quality without either ostentation or fuss. He does not even change his surcoat before going on his pilgrimage, a detail which indicates both his attention to an important matter, his pilgrimage, and a certain disregard for appearances in the face of this more important matter. His motivation for taking the pilgrimage to Canterbury, though not given directly, is implied to be an honorable and necessary homage, combining patriotism and religious feelings. More than any other exterior detail, the Knight's position with regard to his small entourage exemplifies his worthiness as a leader and a father. He has only one servant, who is described as worthy, and his son, who, in spite of his slight excesses of dress, serves his father with modesty and respect. The Knight is surely a fitting leader of the Canterbury Tales. He represents the ideal of the chivalric, medieval code. He both serves and leads.

The Monk, on the other hand, explicitly rejects the religious code to which he has made his vows. He is ostentatious in his dress and manner, and he seems not to serve any ideal. On the contrary, he hunts. It is his hunting which is his largest, single, defining trait. The implied answer to the question, "How shal the world be served?" (GP, 187), is that the world shall not be served. Rather, the Monk will hunt it out, out of his cloister and outside the proper channels of intellectual and manual work. The standard by which we are to see and evaluate the Monk is given to us in the reference to St. Augustine, with all the weight of his authority thrown behind his question of how to serve the world. The monk does not live up to this standard at all. He serves himself.

With the Monk's portrayal, Chaucer the pilgrim is first revealed to us as an unstable narrator. We are not, in other words, to take his judgments as authoritative. The complete impact of his instability is neatly illustrated by the reference to St. Augustine. We are told that the Monk does not keep the rules of his order; they are old, and the Monk "heeld after the newe world" (GP, 176). As to the text which says that a monk out of his cloister is like a fish out of water, "thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre" (GP, 182). Immediately after this comment, at the point when we are aware that the Monk breaks the Rule of his order and goes against church authorities, the narrator breaks in to say, "And I seyde his opinion was good" (GP, 183). This comment is followed by the questions:

> What sholde he studie and make hymselven wood,
> Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
> Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
> As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
> Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!
>
> [GP, 184-188]

Whether this is the Monk's opinion, enthusiastically repeated by the narrator, or the narrator's own opinion, it is not to be expected that St. Augustine's authority would be weakened in the contest. As the description of the Monk continues, we become more and more aware of how the Monk serves the world: his hunting, his clothes, his fine living, and his gold pin shaped like a love-knot. The question of how the world shall be served receives the answer that it will be served outside the cloister, outside the authority of the church father, St. Augustine; or in other words, the world shall be served all too literally. Chaucer the pilgrim is revealed as too readily agreeable and too ready to allow his judgment to be swayed. His enthusiastic praise of the Monk's disobedience to the church and his vows -- one of his vows is obedience -- sets up ironic reverberations in the Monk's portrayal.

From this point in the General Prologue, we will understand and compensate for the particular form of instability exhibited by the pilgrim Chaucer. The question arises in relation to the Prioress: how far back does the narrator's revealed instability reflect? The unequivocal praise accorded to the Knight precludes any narratorial instability in his portrayal, but with the Prioress we can be less sure. E. Talbot Donaldson suggests that the character of the narrator, Chaucer the pilgrim, does affect the Prioress's portrayal. The Prioress, he says, exerts an appeal "through elegant femininity" over the naive pilgrim Chaucer.[14] Sister Madeleva, in defense of the Prioress, does not distinguish between Chaucer as pilgrim and Chaucer as author, but she strongly implies that he describes in the Prioress that which he does not understand.[15]

Although both Donaldson and Sister Madeleva have adopted critical positions that are highly problematic, the extent to which they allow their critical assumptions to run away from them in attempting to understand the Prioress is a tribute to the difficulties of interpreting her. Donaldson's position is the more problematic of the two interpretations. The narrator, he says, is "charmed" by the Prioress: "And finally the Prioress, whom the narrator tries to describe as a religious but ends up by describing, in all delighted honesty, as a romance heroine, thereby accomplishing, without one satiric word, a double satire, on himself as a man as well as on her as a nun."[16] Moreover, Donaldson says that "the reaction of men to a romance heroine is a part of her character." He concludes:

> In any case, I am happy to think that even after five and a half centuries the Prioress is continuing her journey to Canterbury in the company of her three priests, probably making a fool of herself, but surely capable, like other attractive women, of making a bigger fool of us male critics.[17]

The female critic may wish to know how she is to understand the Prioress in this interpretative paradigm. It is enlightening, to be sure, to know that male critics acknowledge that they make fools of themselves, but what happens to the romance heroine's character in the absence of the contributing male perspective? Donaldson suggests that the male perspective is always present because the narrator is male, and that the male reader is, temporarily, at one with the narrator because of their shared maleness. The logical conclusion of this critical perspective leads to a reading of the General Prologue as the perception and arrangement of Chaucer the male pilgrim as understood by Donaldson the male reader, corrected and interpreted by Chaucer the male author and Donaldson the male critic. The details of the Prioress's description tell us more about maleness than about the Prioress. However valid this "hommogeneity," to borrow a French pun, may have been in the production of literature in the fourteenth century, it is certainly not true some six hundred years later.[18] The female reader and critic must find a way to interrupt a critical paradigm that inevitably excludes her and renders her interpretation _a priori_ invalid.

It is neither necessary nor desirable to abandon the concept of Chaucer the pilgrim, but one should be aware that the construction of this concept is, by and large, a function of our historical period. The alternative is to believe that the narrator is the same as the Prioress, that we see the same details and that we will interpret and evaluate them in the same way. Considering the problematic homogeneity of the "we" in this sea of sameness, to mention only one problematic juncture, this is an astounding assumption which even "maleness" will not solve.

Sister Madeleva's critical position is similar to Donaldson's in that she singles out one perspective to the exclusion of any other. It, too, leads to an extreme, though in some ways, the opposite extreme. ~~Sister Madeleva~~ would have us interpret the details of the Prioress's description as though the Prioress does not function in the *Canterbury Tales*. She exists only to reflect a particular understanding of reality, one which Chaucer has misunderstood.[19] This particular understanding of reality is the reality of experience, the experience of living as a nun. Regarding the Prioress's careful table manners, Sister Madeleva comments: "I can well understand how Chaucer might have misinterpreted such apparent over-daintiness, and how critics have found it affected, even 'a little ridiculous.' But none of them ever wore a religious habit, nor had the least idea of what real distress a Sister feels at getting a spot on her habit, especially at table."[20] This is certainly one valid way of approaching the Prioress. It is of some interest to note, however, that Sister Madeleva's approach has produced no school of followers, no great burst of critical writings, and no enthusiastic acknowledgments. Unlike Donaldson, Sister Madeleva is, apparently, neither authoritative nor generative. Both critics appeal to their experience, but Sister Madeleva has not the privilege of assuming that she shares her experience with Chaucer. On the contrary, she must make the differences explicit to her readers, and she thereby makes her political and religious suppositions available to us as well. Sister Madeleva's openness on her critical suppositions should make her approach potentially more valuable, certainly to the female reader and critic excluded from Donaldson's interpretative approach, but also for the twentieth-century reader who does not assume a commonality of experience with a fourteenth-century English courtly author/persona.

Sister Madeleva's approach, however, does represent an extreme. Where Donaldson would make the Prioress a specular object endowed with magical properties of influence, "elegant femininity," over men, Sister Madeleva would make her a subject with full consciousness.[21] From a somewhat different approach, what Sister Madeleva understands as a misunderstanding will be of interest precisely as an encoding of that (mis)-understanding. Despite their differences, both Donaldson and Sister Madeleva would have us believe that there is a higher sanctioning authority for the "right" reading, in other words, that reality, which is stable, is being distorted or misconstrued in a particular way interpretable from only one perspective.

Another possibility is that the narrator becomes the unstable narrator only when his function as an evaluator is joined to his function as a narrator. In this way, one may retain the pilgrim Chaucer as a literary construct.[22] In the Monk's portrayal, Chaucer the pilgrim first enters the narrative as an evaluator. His evaluation is set off from the description with the verse already quoted: "And I seyde his opinion was good" (GP, 183). There is nothing comparable in the description of the Prioress.

The narrator's relationship to the Prioress can be said to exist in only two small phrases, both to do with description of her person, both fairly innocuous references. In neither is there any hint of evaluation. The first comes late in the Prioress's description when the narrator says that her forehead "was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe" (GP, 155). In the second phrase, the narrator's presence is signaled when he says, "Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war" (GP, 157). In both cases, the narrator is inserted as an observer, not as an evaluator. The most that may be said of the tone of these phrases is that there is a sense of apology. The narrator may be apologizing for focusing on details inappropriately observed by one of his rank regarding a person of the Prioress's rank.

It is, no doubt, this sense of an apology that has led critics to evaluate the tone of the portrayal as anything from the gentlest irony to the most savage satire. There is a certain comic effect in the narrator's intrusion at this late point in the description, for the entire focus has been obsessively minute. The narrator's insertion does not change the focus, but it may deflect our attention away from the Prioress and the method of description momentarily to the narrator. This shift does not change the nature of the description, nor does it change the effect. The Prioress is steadily diminished. The most obvious way in which she is diminished is through the use of the adjective "small:" small hounds, small mouth, small beads. The Prioress speaks but small French; her "gretteste ooth" (GP, 120), no matter how it is interpreted, is a small oath;[23] her charity is small, extending only as far as mice and dogs; and her accomplishments, which include provincial French, an ability to recite the church service properly, and good table manners, are small accomplishments. Small wonder that critics have thought her of diminutive size.[24]

A variety of methods is used to accomplish this diminishment. What appears to be no oath at all is the Prioress's greatest oath. What appears to be a worthy achievement, singing the divine service, is reduced to a skill in intoning through her nose. What appears to be enormous is her forehead. The best example of the method of diminishment is the use of two controlling adjectives in the Prioress's description: the adjective "small" and the adjective "ful," meaning "very." The two adjectives contrast curiously. The point appears to be not that everything about the Prioress is small, or, at least, not just that everything about her is small. This is smallness at its epitome, very small. The description of the Prioress's size is a case in point. The narrator says that the Prioress "was nat undergrowe" (GP, 156). When we try to understand this as an element of her description, we may see it with Edward Kelly, as meaning that the Prioress is large.[25] It seems to me, however, that we are given the standard, "undergrowe," which is completely in line with the adjective "small." But the Prioress is not "undergrowe." Whether this means that she is large, medium, or small will depend on how we define undergrown.

Chaucer describes the Prioress's eating habits by echoing a passage from the *Roman de la Rose*, and the method of description is similar. The echo is entirely inappropriate to the Prioress as it comes from the chapter headed "The Duenna tells Fair Welcome how women gain men's love." Chaucer shortens the description, and hence, contains the effect, but the comic method is produced by the very seriousness with which the matter is treated and by the addition of gratuitous repetition, understatement, and the use of negatively connotative words in place of denotative words.[26] Thus, Chaucer, echoing the *Roman de la Rose*, does not simply tell us that the Prioress is a neat and tidy eater, but goes on for nine verses describing the way she wipes her lip, how this prevents grease from getting in her cup, how she does not allow sauce to drip on her habit by the simple expedient of not dipping food too far into the sauce, and so on. The humorous effect of these incongruous comparisons and descriptions should not obscure the fact that the Prioress is diminished thereby. She meets the largest standards with the smallest achievements, and her largest achievements are small.

If the portrayal of the Prioress were given to us in some other context than the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, the Prioress's very smallness might signify in different ways. In comparison to either the Knight or the Monk, the magnitude of the Prioress's achievements shrinks even smaller. The Knight has travelled far from home on the Crusades. In giving us the battles and their locations, Chaucer both recounts the Knight's achievements and enlarges the space against which his worthiness is to be seen (GP, 51-60). The Monk, too, has a large space around him, reflected in his many horses and his love of hunting. Unlike the Knight's, the Monk's field of endeavor is much larger physically than it should be. The large ideal of service should be performed within his cloister in spiritual, intellectual, and manual labor. The Prioress, on the other hand, has a field of endeavor limited, more or less, to the refectory, that is, the dining hall.[27] Set against the battles of the Knight and the hunting of the Monk are her table manners. Set against the Knight who serves and is served within the hierarchy, and against the Monk who hunts rather than serves, is the Prioress who serves small animals. Set against the ideals of service to chivalry and the service of the church is the Prioress's "Love conquers all." The immensity of the ideal hides its non-specificity and the passivity it implies.

The steady diminishment of the Prioress, capped, or pinned, by the ideal of love only makes her smaller. Her status as a nun, a prioress, implies a participation in the monastic vow of service by which the monk is to be judged. The emphasis in both portrayals on appearance and almost ostentatious dress hints at a similar judgement for the Prioress as for the Monk. On the other hand, her status as a courtly lady, implied through the use of courtly literary conventions in her physical appearance, implies a participation in the courtly, aristocratic, and feudal ideal by which the Knight is judged. The similarity in their positions as the head of an entourage is undercut by the failure to explicate the nature of the bond holding the Prioress's entourage together. The Prioress fails to satisfy the courtly, aristocratic, feudal ideal as much as she fails to satisfy the Western European monastic ideal.

In introducing the ideal of love into the Prioress's portrayal, Chaucer at once mitigates the Prioress's failure to satisfy these ideals, and gives us something of a red herring. The standard by which we are to judge the Prioress is not the religious nor the secular ideal, but the ideal of love. The nature of this love, "Love conquers all," implies that the Prioress need be no more than passive and receptive in order to serve this non-specific ideal. Indeed, her small achievements amount to a great deal, given that she need do nothing at all; love will do all that is required. The ideal of love seems, appropriately, very small; it is not something to strive for, but something that happens. Love, "amor," might also imply both the secular and religious ideals, and the Prioress's position between the Knight and the Monk lends support to the inclusion of both ideals in the concept of love; love, that is, transcends and invokes both ideals. On the one hand, the Prioress serves her conception of the ideal, and the manifestations of her service are appropriately small. On the other hand, her placement between the Knight and the Monk suggests two larger ideals of love than that which is conceived in the Prioress. Moreover, her concept of love can be seen as including both monastic and secular love. The effect is to trap the Prioress between the two larger ideals, as well as within her own small ideal. The ambiguity of her portrayal is heightened, but the ambiguity must be played out, or is constrained by, the two ideals within which it is set.

If we consider the Prioress outside the frame of the Canterbury Tales, her portrayal changes rather dramatically. In terms of the social reality of medieval nuns as described by Eileen Power, the Prioress is a moderate and well-behaved nun. The charges brought against the Prioress by critics usually include the propriety of her going on a pilgrimage, her pets, and her dress. Regarding the first charge, it is possible to consider the Prioress's pilgrimage, not as the transgression of ecclesiastical law, but as active resistance to what large numbers of nuns considered an objectionable, unrealistic, and unfounded ecclesiastical prejudice concerning the nature of women.

The numerous injunctions against nuns leaving their monasteries should be connected, Eileen Power says, to the "enclosure movement in the Western Church."[28] Strict and perpetual enclosure was not part of the Benedictine vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, and while the enclosure movement was technically applicable to both nuns and monks, the church saw it as a "vital necessity" for nuns. Nuns all over Europe resisted the enclosure movement. Since enclosure was virtually unenforceable without the nuns' co-operation, and Power says that the nuns "never really made any attempt to obey the regulations," the bishops simply tried to regulate rather than end travel.[29] The opposition of nuns to enclosure should not be underestimated as the following account of an attempted enclosure in thirteenth century England indicates:

> . . . the Bishop visited the house of nuns of Markyate and on the following day he caused to be recited before the nuns of the same [house] in chapter the statute put forth by the lord Pope Boniface VIII concerning the enclosure of nuns, explained it in the vulgar tongue and giving them a copy of the same statute under his seal, ordered

> them in virtue of obedience henceforth to observe it in the matter of enclosure . . . But when the Bishop was going away, certain of the nuns, disobedient to these injunctions, hurled the said statute at his back and over his head, and as well the Prioress as the convent appeared to consent to those who threw it, following the bishop to the outer gate of the house and declaring unanimously that they were not content in any way to observe such a statute.[30]

As with travel, so too with pets and fashion. Power notes, "For three weary centuries the bishops waged a holy war against fashion in the cloister and waged it in vain." She adds that the "crusade against pets was not more successful than the crusade against fashion."[31] Power suggests that the continued injunctions against travel, pets, and fashion are themselves evidence of the continued practices of nuns. One hesitates to call the practices opposition, for the practices were not a specific attempt to resist ecclesiastical injunctions. Rather, the injunctions were an attempt to oppose certain customs.

In the context of the General Prologue, the Prioress is placed between two powerful and primarily male ideals, and it is within and between these that her ideal of love is situated. The Prioress's diminishment, in the method by which she is described, is a part of the placement of the ideal of love. The Canterbury Tales, however, is a network of potential relationships and contexts. When we examine the Prioress's Tale in relation to her portrayal in the General Prologue, something different emerges. Released from the shadows of the powerful ideals of secular and religious love and service, the Prioress demonstrates the value of her own small ideal of love. Released from her appearance into voice, she carves out her territory. Although her entrapment between the ideals in the General Prologue contrasts sharply with her performance in her tale, we find the same diminishment and the same enclosing movement governing the dynamics of her representation.

Granville Sydnor Hill argues that the Prioress's "rhetoric in the Tale reveals a didactic, authoritative side to the woman's character, a manner appropriate to her responsible rank."[32] Hill's argument is based on the analysis of rhetorical devices. She points out that the prayers which begin and end the tale, the invocation to God and the Virgin Mary of the Prologue and the invocation to St. Hugh, give the Tale "a rhetorical solemnity." In addition, the apostrophes with which the Tale is interspersed add to the solemnity, and give the Tale a "pastoral dimension."[33] Hill points out that the Prioress, on at least one occasion, asserts that she has said something which she has, in fact, not said: "As I have seyd, thurghout the Juerie,/ This litel child, as he cam to and fro" (551-52). The Prioress has not told us that the child walked through the Jewish quarter, only that he walked through a street. As Hill says, "For the Prioress to have prefaced this new piece of information with "As I have seyd" suggests her confidence in herself as a narrator (gained, perhaps, through many years of telling this _Tale_) as well as her willingness to take command and credit, whether or not the need exists."[34]

The Prioress's authoritative manner in the performance of her tale must be offset, however, by the structural similarities between the Prioress and the central figure of her tale. The _Prioress's Tale_ is a Miracle of the Blessed Virgin. A young boy offers praise to the Virgin Mary through the singing of a song, the _Alma Redemptoris Mater_, and is murdered by Jews for his singing. He continues to sing, thereby identifying his murderers, and offering praise to the Virgin Mary whose intervention has produced the miracle. When the abbot removes a grain placed in the boy's mouth by the Virgin Mary, the boy dies and is buried with the honour due to a martyr.[35]

The similarities between the Prioress and the young boy of her Tale are too obvious to be overlooked. Both are small: the Prioress figuratively, the little clergeon literally. The controlling adjective of the portrayal of the Prioress in the General Prologue is "small;" the controlling adjective of the portrayal of the central figure of the *Prioress's Tale* is "little." Given the Prioress's limited knowledge of French, the historical evidence, and the Nun's Priest's small Latin joke in his tale,[36] it seems fair to assume that the Prioress does not understand Latin any more than the little clergeon. The highest accomplishment of both is their singing, which they may not understand, but which, nevertheless, bears witness of Christianity to the world. Moreover, we should note that just as the little clergeon is specifically placed in the rather ordinary world of people, exotically named Asia, but described as a conventional England, the Prioress is likewise situated. Her accomplishment in learning French is domesticated by the comment that she learned it "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe" (GP, 125). Like the Prioress, the little clergeon and his story are firmly attached to England, most firmly by the apostrophe to Hugh of Lincoln with which the tale ends. The exoticism of the setting of the tale functions inversely, for it shows only the familiarity of the exotic.

It may be said that much of the tale is made thoroughly familiar. The little schoolboy learns what was a familiar song in the culture of the fourteenth century, the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*.[37] What might otherwise seem an exotic desire for the grace of martyrdom is shown as the familiar desire to learn a song. Even God in this tale is familiarized by the displacement of worship to the Virgin Mary. In part, the tale is also familiarized by its simplicity, a simplicity reflected in the rhetorical devices by which it is made. As Robert Payne notes, four rhetorical devices are used. Of these, three contribute to the simplicity: determinatio, or the "controlled application of selected limiting adjectives;" circumlocutio and epithetum, both based on the "substitution of a highly connotative phrase or word for a primarily denotative one."[38] We have seen one example of determinatio in the use of the adjective "little." Following Payne, we may add to this adjective those with a similar meaning: "smale" and "yonge." Examples of circumlocutio include "Oure blisful Lady, Cristes mooder deere" (510) and "Oure firste foo" (558), while an example of epithetum would be "This cursed Jew" (570). Payne, from whom these examples are taken, comments that the "tendency to black-and-white contrasts . . . is characteristic of the whole machinery of elaboration in the poem."[39] The contrast between the "innocent" clergeon (566) and the "cursed" Jews (574) is a simple, stark contrast allowing no intermediates.

The tale is far more sophisticated than its surface would seem to admit. Marie Hamilton shows that the tale either quotes or refers to all the chief portions of the mass for December 28, the Childermas or the Feast of the Innocents. Hamilton notes that "the figure of the archetypal Rachel, refusing to be comforted, had a central place in the liturgical dramas dealing with the Slaughter of the Innocents."[40] We will remember the clergeon's mother's piteous grief, and the reference to her at the bier as "This newe Rachel" (627). Sumner Ferris shows Chaucer's rare, but effective use of onomatopoeia and alliteration in Satan's speech, the most concentrated line of which is "In youre despit, and synge of swich sentence" (563). Ferris calls Satan's speech a "hissing stanza," and, indeed, it bristles with "s" sounds.[41] There is also the effective and repeated use of invocation or apostrophe throughout the tale, finding its contrast in Satan's hissing speech, his "devocation," or address downwards to the Jews. The _Prioress's_ _Prologue_ and _Tale_ is, also, written in rhyme royal stanza. Charles Muscatine suggests that this form is used in the _Canterbury Tales_ as an "implement of seriousness." Payne, replying to Muscatine, says that "more precisely . . . it is always an implement of a particularly concentrated artifice of emotion," while Martin Stevens says that it is "a vehicle for elevated expression."[42]

Of the technical sophistication of the tale, only a limited part may be attributed to the Prioress. The references to the Childermas may likely be attributed to her, as may the tendency to black-and-white contrasts. On the latter point, one wishes to be careful, for the nature of the tale will contribute to a tendency to absolute contrasts. It is, after all, a miracle tale in which a boy is viciously murdered by Jews. The anti-Semitism of the tale cannot be ignored by modern readers, but it is important to note that the larger forces represented by each side are themselves absolute: the goodness of God and the Virgin Mary as opposed to the evil of Satan. The little clergeon and the Jews are the human, structural equivalents of the divine forces of good and evil.

John Archer, in an intriguing article on the anti-Semitism of the *Prioress's Tale*, suggests that the anti-Semitism is a structural and literary component of the tale rather than a specific Christian doctrine. He notes that the Tale deals with a "conception of time different from our own," one which he sums up as "what Augustine called 'the present time of past things.'"[43] Archer explains:

> The Crucifixion extended backwards as well as forwards, for Christ was somehow both child and man at once. It is not surprising that this parallelism, present to a great extent within the Gospels themselves, should demand a structural equivalent for the Crucifixion in the infant-world of the Nativity.[44]

One such structural equivalent was the Slaughter of the Innocents.

As Archer suggests, this conception of time will lead to the re-inscription of events that are no longer applicable to the moment in which they are being inscribed. Familiarization is one method by which this re-inscription may take place. Things which seem exotic are brought into the present moment as constitutive of the present moment. That which makes them exotic is suppressed in favor of that which makes them familiar. Hence, Asia is the structural equivalent of England, and the differences between the two are ignored. The more dangerous example is the Jews. Their exoticism, their otherness, is familiarized by making them the structural equivalent of Satan. The differences are not only ignored or suppressed; they are covered over, obscured by characterizing Jews as evil and in league with Satan.

Richard J. Schoeck argues that the anti-Semitism of the tale is characteristic of the Prioress, not of the tale nor of Chaucer.[45] One reason for being cautious about attributing the structural contrasts and conflations to the Prioress, however, is that she thereby writes herself out of the categories set up in the tale. In spite of the many similarities between the little clergeon and the Prioress, there are a number of important differences. The Prioress is an adult, not a seven year old boy. By both her social position and her position in the monastic order, she has responsibilities and obligations that the little clergeon does not have. In addition, the Prioress, by the evidence of the General Prologue, is not innocent. At best, we may say that she is naïve, but not innocent.[46]

The similarities between the Prioress and the clergeon diminish the Prioress, as do the differences. The Prioress suffers both ways. Moreover, she does not fit into either the category of absolute good nor into the category of absolute evil. She is neither the little clergeon nor the Jews, neither a murderer nor a martyr. As happened in the General Prologue, the Prioress falls somewhere in between. In her tale, by its very subject-matter, she tends more toward good than toward evil, but as in the General Prologue, she is diminished by that very tendency. Her concerns, shown as small in the General Prologue, are given a certain elevation by their similarities to the concerns of the little clergeon, but measured by their differences, the Prioress's small concerns are discordantly small. She cannot serve, or to use the concept assigned to her, she cannot love in the same way as the little clergeon.

The nature of the little clergeon's love and service is, as the Prioress's motto on her brooch suggests, a relatively passive love. He learns a song which he then sings as he walks to and from school. If he is aware of the danger in singing, we are not told. Instead, we are told that his love for the Virgin Mary is what inspires him to continue singing. This is not to say that the clergeon was wrong to continue singing, but in comparison to the martyr St. Cecilie of the Second Nun's Tale, his love is a lesser thing. St. Cecilie aggressively pursues a course of action knowing the risks entailed. The paradigm of her tale would be more appropriate to the age, rank, and status of the Prioress than the paradigm of the little clergeon. St. Cecilie's love is active and encompassing. It includes knowledge.[47] The clergeon's devotion, by comparison, is passive and limited, a love without knowledge or comprehension. It is, finally, a love appropriate to a small child, not to a Prioress.

In her tale, as in her portrayal in the General Prologue, the Prioress is shown as small: in her concerns, in her achievements, and in her love. She is shown as small in relation to the codes which she invokes: the feudal, courtly code and the monastic code in the General Prologue; good and evil as well as love and comprehension in her tale. Literally surrounded by these large codes, and constituted by them, she is consistently shown as failing to meet them. The ideals are brought down to her level, and in that very movement, she is diminished and enclosed by them.

That the Prioress is enclosed as part of the arrangement of the *Canterbury Tales* may be seen by examining the context of her tale. It is set between the *Shipman's Tale* and the tale of *Sir Thopas*, which is followed by what appears to be a revision of the *Prioress's Tale*, that is, the *Tale of Melibee*. The placement of her tale between the *Shipman's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* is certainly odd. The *Shipman's Tale*, preceding the Prioress's, is a fabliau, the theme of which is 'the lover's gift regained.' Love in this tale is equated with sex and money, and the lover is a monk whose monastic vows are completely thrown over. The tale of *Sir Thopas*, which follows the *Prioress's Tale*, is told in what the Host calls "doggerel" rhyme. It is about a knight who is a veritable paragon of chivalry, but the tale's genre is burlesque. He is a romance knight, and because this is a burlesque, he shares the limitations of the genre: the handsome, well-dressed knight battles giants to win the love of the elf-queen. The Prioress's highly religious, and apparently sincere tale of the clergeon looks odd in this company. Her concept of love sits uneasily between the concepts of love shown in the Shipman's Tale and Sir Thopas.[48]

What is most striking, however, is that the Prioress's context in the General Prologue is similar to that of her tale. The monk of the Shipman's Tale is similar to the Monk of the General Prologue in that he rejects his monastic ideals. The knight of the tale of Sir Thopas is similar to the Knight of the General Prologue in that he is elevated. Both tales, however, show a debasement of the portrayals of the General Prologue: the monk through satire and the knight through burlesque. Neither is a flattering representation of either the two concepts of love or the two estates.

But what of the Prioress's Tale? Her tale has not the comedy of these other two tales. Its religious sentiment and concept of love garner associations of authentic sincerity through echoes of the Childermas, the form, and the invocations. It retains its sincerity, in spite of the comedy that surrounds it, because, in part, it is set off from the other two tales. After the laughter and jokes which follow the Shipman's Tale, the Host turns to the

Prioress and asks her to tell a tale. His manner is explicitly described. He speaks to her, "As curteisly as it had been a mayde" (445). The elaborateness of his manner has been interpreted as satiric or ironic, but it seems to me that the Prioress's status and rank preclude such an interpretation.[49] If the courtesy is hurried, it is hurried by the verse, not by the Host. The elaborate courtesy would be, after all, appropriate in an innkeeper addressing the aristocratic head of a monastic order.

For all its decorum the courtesy of the Host is, nevertheless, an insufficiently serious context for her tale. Coming so quickly after the congratulatory laughter following the _Shipman's Tale_, the Host's "passe over," and request to the Prioress, all in the same sentence, is a fast movement. It seems an artificial and arbitrary introduction to her tale and separation from the _Shipman's Tale_. It has the appearance of setting her tale off from the Shipman's without constituting a convincing separation. Similarly, the Host turns, at the end of her tale, very quickly to Chaucer, although in this case, it is two phrases of sobriety that separate the Prioress's serious tale from the Host's "japen" (693).

Both the introductory and concluding link severely limit the effect of the _Prioress's Tale_. Although her tale is also elevated by these links, the courtesy of the Host and the sobriety of the company, the context undermines the elevation. Had the tale been elevated in the context of, say, the Second Nun's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Tale, it might have been possible to understand the concept and ideal of love which the Prioress advocates as being a happy medium. Since it is not so placed, we are not at liberty to draw that conclusion. Instead, her tale is placed between a fabliau and a burlesque. In this context, her tale will seem elevated, but the ground from which it is elevated undermines the elevation. It may even be that the three tales are linked by the limited concepts of love which they present. The Prioress's concept, like the others, is inadequate. In contrast to the debasement which monastic and courtly love suffer in the other two tales, the Prioress's type is higher, but it is, nonetheless, a limited type of love.

The Prioress's Tale is seen, then, as participating in the themes of the other two tales, but it is set apart by a movement of elevation in the links. By setting the tale in relation to two debased ideals of love, Chaucer diminishes the elevation of the tale. By setting the tale between laughter, he encloses the effect of the tale, even as he formally isolates it between the deference of the Host and the sobriety of the company. The ideal attached to the Prioress is seen, finally, as limited.

The Prioress is connected to other pilgrims and tales:

for instance, the Second Nun and the Nun's Priest tell tales that are part of the network that reflects on the Prioress. Another part of this network is the connection, speculative, to be sure, that links the Prioress to the other two women pilgrims. Almost the first aspect one notes in considering the three together is that the Prioress is again in the middle. She is portrayed in the General Prologue more in terms of her body than is the Second Nun, but less than is the Wife of Bath. She is neither completely religious, like the Second Nun, nor completely secular, like the Wife of Bath.

Each of the three women pilgrims tells a tale in which love is a prominent part. Interestingly enough, the tales of both the Second Nun and the Wife of Bath are the tales of a woman's love. The subject of the _Second Nun's Tale_ is the love of a woman for her God and her religion. The manifestation of St. Cecilie's love is her willingness to suffer and die, in a slow and grisly manner. At the same time, St. Cecilie converts a number of pagans, and they too are manifestations of her love. Like the Virgin Mary, St. Cecilie's virginity miraculously engenders fertility. St. Cecilie rejects the love between men and women, converting it by her higher love to her higher love. The _Wife of Bath's Tale_ is, among other things, about sexual love between men and women.

Although the Second Nun cannot be connected to her tale in quite the same way as the Wife of Bath is connected to hers, there are similarities. In both tales, the main female figure is a human with special powers. This allows each to participate actively as narrative agent in the working out of the narrative. Both tales have happy endings, endings which would become standard for the nineteenth century novel, but which would become increasingly unsatisfactory in the twentieth century. The ending of the Second Nun's Tale is death, blissful martyrdom, while the ending of the Wife of Bath's Tale is marriage. The potential power of each central female figure is sublimated to the desired ending.

The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale has an effect, however, which is the opposite of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale sparks comments, interruptions, reactions, and replies, as much in the Canterbury Tales as in the literary commentary. The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale sparks silence, a silence so profound that it lasts just under five miles and is only broken by an outsider who has not heard her tale.

Falling somewhere between these two powerful paradigms, woman as the servant of God and the happy ending of death, and woman as the servant of her body and the happy ending of marriage, lies the Prioress's Tale. The love of her tale is the love of a little boy for the Virgin Mary, and in parallel, the love of a mother, both the widow and the Virgin Mary, for her son. One way of interpreting the relation of the Prioress to her tale is by way of a so-called "maternal instinct." Florence Ridley succumbs to this interpretation, saying:

> The story is one that suits perfectly the woman whom Chaucer depicts. The Monk would never tell a tale like hers, nor the Friar, nor the Clerk, nor the Pardoner, nor even the Nun's Priest; for they are all mature men, intelligent, realistic, each with his own brand of sophisticated humor. Only from the Prioress of the "General Prologue" could we expect a humorless display of naïveté, ignorance, blind, vehement devotion, and suppressed maternal longing; and that is precisely what we get. Her tale, as a miracle of the Virgin, is one whose very recital is an act of worship, like a telling of beads.[50]

Florence Ridley's interpretation of the Prioress is often considered a balanced approach, particularly with regard to the anti-Semitism of the tale. Her highly unflattering interpretation depends to a great extent on attributing to the Prioress an autonomy which, as a literary construct, she simply does not have. We may wish to say that the Prioress's "humorless display of naïveté, ignorance, blind, vehement devotion" indicates a locus of characteristics somehow consonant with the apparent lack of consciousness we may discern in the portrayal of the Prioress in the General

Prologue. And the Prioress is depicted as having little self-consciousness of the multiple interpretations possible from her outer appearance. The distinction we should be making, however, is the distinction between the Prioress as an object of observation and the Prioress as a subject of full consciousness.

If we are to retain these categories in interpretations of the Prioress, it would seem that we must say that the Prioress does not fit them; she is both and neither. The Wife of Bath, we may note, is both; the Second Nun is neither. Perhaps it would be more productive to inquire as to why the Prioress is both and neither than to continue choosing sides. If we are to consider maternal instinct or "suppressed maternal longing" as a link between the teller and her tale, we must ask what we mean by it. It is demonstrably not an instinct which all mothers have and all others lack. Thus, it is neither maternal nor is it instinctual.

It seems more likely that we are dealing with the belief in special characteristics which are socially attached to motherhood.[51] It seems important, then, to note that neither the Second Nun nor the Wife of Bath exhibits such characteristics, whatever they may be. The Prioress's maternal instinct is often inferred from the passage that describes her weeping over her dogs. Florence Ridley, for instance, says, "The Prioress is tenderhearted; she is simpleminded; those dogs are her children, the only ones she is ever likely to have; and so nothing could be more natural than her tears. It is by those very tears that Chaucer most clearly shows that her religious vocation, while it may have been redirected, has not stifled her basic feminine instinct of maternal love."[52] Ridley's position could be criticized on a number of fronts, but anyone who has ever lived with either pets or children will recognize that the analogy between children and animals is based on either the childishness of animals or the animality of children. Both allow the human adult to disavow these characteristics and set themselves up as superior.

Clearly, the Prioress does not adopt this tactic. Instead, she weeps, in some sense identifying with at least the pain of the dogs, but more importantly, indicating her powerlessness to prevent their pain or their death. This latter characteristic seems to be what is indicated by the term "maternal love" or "instinct." The widow of the _Prioress's_ _Tale_ cannot help her child; she can only raise the alarm when he disappears and, then, help search for him. The Virgin Mary cannot prevent the death of the boy, just as she could not not save her own child. Nor can she return him, except temporarily, to life. She can only help, through a miracle, to ensure that his death is revenged. Lurking under maternal instinct and maternal love is powerlessness and submission.[53] If we think back to the sign-making of St. Cecilie in the _Second_ _Nun's_ _Prologue_, we will notice that what is missing there is the power and non-submission, that is, the assertion of St. Cecilie in the tale.[54]

Many critics, Charles Muscatine for instance, have argued that the Prioress's Tale reflects a new religious sensibility.[55] Carolyn Collette defines this new sensibility as valuing emotion over reason, and as focusing on the physical and tangible. In this religious sensibility, one learns the outward forms as a way of showing love and understanding.[56] Other critics, notably Hardy Long Frank, have suggested that the Prioress's Tale and her ideal of love are preeminently a part of the Marian tradition in which the sacred and profane are mixed. In this tradition, physical beauty is meant to reflect moral beauty. It is quite likely that the outward forms of courtesy will also acquire significance. Frank concludes that the Prioress is flawed but good in her stereotypical femininity.[57]

It may be that the Prioress is a reflection of this new religious sensibility. The emphasis on her appearance and manners in the General Prologue would then constitute the reality of religious sensibility, and indeed, make it possible to write of the Prioress as a reflection. Then, too, the little clergeon's singing, his care in learning the song and his singing of it, would be part of the same religious sensibility. By this interpretation, there would be little or no irony in the Prioress's portrayal in the General Prologue. All the details would contribute to an understanding of the care with which the Prioress observes the outward forms. The motto on her brooch would indicate, indeed, that "love conquers all" (Amor vincit omnia) should be taken literally. The emphasis on smallness would be significant in relation to the immensity of the ideal, that is, the view from heaven.[58]

Such an interpretation would, however, put the meaning of the Prioress in the General Prologue and in her prologue and tale in opposition to that of the Second Nun. For the tangible and physically represented Prioress, the letter would not kill, but rather would speak the spirit.[59] This interpretation would explain in part why the narrator's instability is not revealed until after the description of the Prioress. His instability, even as evaluator, would and does destabilize the equivalence between appearance and reality. It would, also, be possible to argue that the connection between the description of the Prioress in the General Prologue and her tale should be made in reference to the Virgin Mary, subject to God, and not to the little clergeon. This interpretation would also take us very close to Sister Madeleva's interpretation, although it would not require that the Prioress be understood as fully conscious. Whatever consciousness she might be said to have of herself would be precisely a consciousness of herself as specular object, as one who is observed and takes care that the details of her appearance are indicative of reality, and that would take us back to Robertson, albeit via a different route.[60]

It seems to me that this interpretation requires, before all else, the belief that appearance is the same as reality. In the Canterbury Tales, however, appearance is merely indicative of earthly reality. The intervention of the narrator is required when earthly reality indicated by appearance is to be bypassed, as in, for example, the Knight, the Clerk, or the Parson. In other words, the Knight is not just a ~~di~~rty, poor man, without the resources or inclination to outfit himself according to his position; he is a working knight, and his representation makes this quite clear. It is, of course, possible that the narrator cues us only with male pilgrims.

Nevertheless, the movement from appearance to divine reality is not textually self-evident. We have already been told of the Prioress's appearance "hir smylyng was ful symple and coy" (GP, 119), before we hear about her observation of divine service. The Prioress is presented in worldly terms. She participates in the courtly as well as the monastic ideal, ~~wi~~within and between which she is positioned. She is part of both, but not completely either. She cannot be placed within the category of the ideal realized, as is the Knight, or the ideal disavowed, as the Monk, nor within the two absolutes of her own tale. Her very suspension between these codes discourages evaluation in their terms. It is not enough to say, however, that she is presented ambiguously, for she is diminished within the ambiguity of her representation, from her omission in the link between the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, to the context within which her tale is placed, to the importance of the adjective "small" in her portrayal in the General Prologue.

Her position in the middle, illustrated by the motto on her brooch, suggests transcendence of the codes which literally surround her. The Prioress, however, also participates in these codes. She is constituted and elevated by the codes, and her subsequent exclusion from them suggests not transcendence, but diminishment and submission. Thus, if we imagine her in the dynamics of her context in a visual image, we may imagine her as a very small point between the code of the Knight and the code of the Monk, between the quiet worthiness of the Knight and the raucous disavowal of the Monk. Her tale is placed between a satire and a burlesque of these two ideals, and her tale is structured by opposites into which she cannot fit. The paradigm of her tale lies between the paradigm of the *Second Nun's Tale* and that of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, even as she is between these two pilgrims.

The term enclosure fits the dynamics of her representation. It is a term meant to recall what Eileen Power calls "the enclosure movement in the Western Church," a movement specifically directed at religious women because of their perceived fragility.[61] The Prioress, ambiguously in the middle and made small, is finally hidden behind the powerful ideals which constitute her, surround her, and over-shadow her. It is only within these terms, the dynamics of enclosure, that we can make the connection between the Prioress and the Virgin Mary, a connection which must rest on powerlessness and submission. This possibility opens for the Prioress, but it is only available after enclosure, and it is apparently fitting only for a woman.

Chapter III: Notes

[1] *The Parson's Tale*, 929-950; and Shahar, p. 5.

[2] Stephen P. Witte, "*Muscipula Diaboli* and Chaucer's Portrait of the Prioress," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 13 (1977), 227-37, is a good example of whole-hearted condemnation. Witte interprets the portrait as harsh, satiric, and condemning because the Prioress is manipulated by Satan (237). For an example of admiration, see Sister M. Madeleva, "Chaucer's Nuns," in her *Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1965 [1925]), pp. 3-42. The standard interpretation attempts a middle ground: Lowes argues for "delicate irony" (440), and "the delightfully imperfect submergence of the woman in the nun" (442); while Florence Ridley, *The Prioress and the Critics*, University of California Publications, English Studies, no. 30 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), argues that "Chaucer intended to satirize her simplicity, emotionalism, and frustrated femininity with an air of mild amusement" (p. 35). Ridley's monograph remains the best overview of the criticism up to 1965, and a useful guide for much that comes after.

[3] Wood, p. 100.

[4] Patterson, 685.

[5] The three divisions given here are those suggested by Brewer, "Class Distinction in Chaucer." Brewer notes that there are three social structures in Chaucer: estate or degree; the division between "gentils" and "churls;" and the order of the three estates (290-305). M. A. Whitaker has suggested another division: the division between "lerned" and "lewd."

[6] Ridley, *The Prioress*, argues against this interpretation. "The Host," she says, in his request to the Prioress to tell a tale, "simply knows that the Prioress is worthy of courtesy and respect, and so treats her accordingly. Since he is the only one of the Canterbury pilgrims whom Chaucer presents again and again as a keen appraiser of character, it seems plausible to believe that Chaucer shared his feeling that she was worthy of such treatment" (p. 34). Ridley does not see the disjunction

between the orderings that I am suggesting here. David, *The Strumpet Muse*, presents a more usual view of the ordering of the tales: "There will be no more drawing of lots; the Host himself will summon the contestants into the lists; and he calls next upon the Monk -- the closest thing to a knight among the ecclesiastics. The Nobility having spoken, it is now the turn of an aristocratic representative of the Church" (p. 91). It may be that David's military metaphor blinds him to the Prioress as the ranking representative of the church, according to the General Prologue, even though he has earlier noted that the Prioress "obviously comes from an excellent family" (p. 67), is a lady (p. 68), and governs the convent from which she comes (p. 67). He astutely notes that the convent itself represents a compromise between the feudal nobility and the church, but he fails to recognize the implications of the compromise for the portrayal; he concludes that the Prioress "is characterized primarily as a lady instead of as a nun" (p. 68).

[7] The Prioress has, of course, a "voice" in the General Prologue. It is, however, a reported voice: her singing of the divine service and her French.

[8] *The Ancrene Riwle*, trans. M. B. Salu (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), p. 183.

[9] Nuns, once professed, were considered dead before the law. See Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*: "for a nun, dead in the eyes of the law which governed the world, could claim no share in her father's estate." Power adds, "It is possible to collect from various sources a remarkable series of legal documents which illustrate the practice of putting girls into nunneries, so as to secure their inheritance" (p. 34). Their exclusion from inheritance notwithstanding, nuns could still be wealthy in their own right. Annuities were, increasingly over time, provided for individual nuns, and gifts and legacies were bequeathed to them rather than to their community. The older customs of paying the *peculium*, originally a clothing allowance, and pittances directly to individual nuns also encouraged private property. For a fuller discussion of private property, see Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, pp. 322-40. In the newer orders, poverty was taken to mean absolute poverty, but the growing emphasis on enclosure for nuns was at odds with this aim. See Brenda Bolton, "Mulieres sanctae," for a general discussion of this problem, and A. F. C. Bourdillon, *The Order of Minoresses in England* (Manchester: The University Press, 1926), pp. 4-5, for a discussion of the problem with reference to Minoresses, who were of the order of St. Clare.

[10] Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 4.

[11] On the class composition of nunneries, see Power,

Medieval English Nunneries, pp. 4-41; and Hilpisch, p. 47.

[12] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, lists the qualifications for becoming head of a house: "she should be above the age of twenty-one, born in wedlock and of good reputation" (p. 45). In practice, Power says, "It usually happened that the head of a nunnery was a woman of some social standing in her own right" (p. 42). The Prioress's wealth is implied at a number of points in the General Prologue, especially in what she feeds her pets (GP, 146-47); and in her beads (GP, 158-62). Labarge adds an intriguing sidelight to the Prioress's beads, when, in the context of sumptuary laws, she says, "In 1459 the provost of Paris confiscated from an elegant, and perhaps pious, prostitute not only a shoulder cape of satin furred with miniver and a silver-gilt belt but also a coral rosary with a silver agnus dei and a book of hours with a sliver clasp, because these were the marks of an honest woman" (p. 201). On the Prioress's beads, and the use of lapidary, see John Block Friedman, "The Prioress's Beads 'of Smal Coral'," Medium Aevum, 39 (1970), 301-5. For the view that the Prioress is middle-class, see John P. Cutts, "Madame Eglentyne's Saint Loy," Studies in the Humanities, 7 (1979), 34-38; and Charles Moorman, "The Prioress as Pearly Queen," Chaucer Review, 13 (1978-79), 25-33.

[13] The Knight has been interpreted in a different way; Terry Jones, Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), argues that the Knight is a mercenary and the object of Chaucer's continual satire. The weight of critical opinion is against this interpretation: see, for instance, Derek Brewer An Introduction to Chaucer (London: Longman, 1984), pp. 171-2; David, The Strumpet Muse, pp. 58-59; and Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry, 2nd ed. (Ipswich: Boydell Press Ltd., 1974 [1970]), p. 155.

[14] Donaldson, p. 4.

[15] Sister M. Madeleva says, "He [Chaucer] was representing the visible effects of a spiritual life of which he had no experimental or vicarious knowledge" (p. 5).

[16] Donaldson, p. 62.

[17] Donaldson, pp. 63-64.

[18] Richard Firth Green, "Women in Chaucer's Audience," Chaucer Review, 18 (1983-84), 146-54, argues that the historical evidence suggests that Chaucer's audience was "primarily, if not exclusively, male" (149). He adds, "The probability that there were some women, albeit in rather small numbers and perhaps only occasionally, in Chaucer's

audience seems high" (150).

[19] Sister Madeleva, see note 15, above. Regarding the Prioress's wimple, Sister Madeleva says, "Here, again, a secular point of view fails to catch the chief significance of things that may have deceived even Chaucer" (p. 17). Sister Madeleva provides a reading of the Prioress in relation to the Rule of St. Benedict, emphasizing the lived experience of this context.

[20] Sister Madeleva, p. 14.

[21] For a sophisticated and challenging theory on the "crucial relation of woman as constituted in representation to women as historical subjects," see de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't, p. 15 ff.

[22] Two important critical statements on the pilgrim Chaucer may be found in David, The Strumpet Muse, pp. 217-21; and Brewer, An Introduction to Chaucer, p. 45. Both David and Brewer suggest that our concept of the narrator is too rigid: David says, "a 'persona' does not impose the restrictions of dramatic consistency that we would expect from a character in a novel or play" (p. 218); and Brewer says, "Chaucer was influenced by this characteristically Gothic shifting point-of-view created by the poet's variable persona in the poem. He developed the device of the persona in his own way very elaborately and fluidly" (p. 45). See also, Delany who comments, "So that it may at a given point be either true or not true, or both, to assert that Chaucer "is" or "is not" his narrator" (p. 54).

[23] The meaning of the Prioress's oath has puzzled commentators. See Robinson, p. 654; and Ridley, The Prioress, pp. 16-17, for a review of the possibilities. Cutts advances the theory that St. Loy means St. Louis IX (35-37). It seems to me that if we cannot define the meaning of the oath specifically, we should be clear about the parameters of its meaning in the portrayal of the Prioress: on one side that it is not swearing of a serious or blasphemous sort because it does not take the Lord's name in vain; on the other side that swearing is a significant detail of her portrayal when a Prioress should not swear at all. This detail contributes to the Prioress's ambiguity, but given the parameters of its meaning, it, too, is clearly a limited ambiguity.

[24] This seems to be the general consensus, although the issue of the Prioress's size is seldom addressed directly, but see note 25, below.

[25] Edward H. Kelly, "By Mouth of Innocentz: The Prioress Vindicated," Papers on Language and Literature, 5

(1969), 362-74. Kelly argues that the portrait of the Prioress is comic. He notes the "piling up of diminutives" (374), and says that they "can only function humorously if they are in opposition to the grand or large, namely the Prioress herself" (365). Kelly wishes to avoid contaminating the Prioress's Tale with this comic view, and so, interprets the movement from the General Prologue to her tale as one of enlargement, ending with the artistry that "swells in the tale itself" (374). M. A. Whitaker has suggested that the verse, "For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe" (GP, 156), is an instance of litotes, which would further support Kelly's argument.

[26] The Romance of the Rose, p. 280, Chapter 62, "The Duenna tells Fair Welcome how women gain men's love," l. 101-26 [13382-13407].

[27] According to Diane Bornstein, The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983), the ideal of courtesy books "was an ideal of passivity and claustration . . . Although women played important roles in the political and economic spheres, their duties within the home were emphasized, and the household was considered their proper domain" (pp. 120-21).

[28] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, p. 346.

[29] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, pp. 353-54.

[30] In Power, Medieval English Nunneries, pp. 351-52.

[31] Power, Medieval English Nunneries, p. 304 and p. 307.

[32] Hill, p. 197.

[33] Hill, p. 184.

[34] Hill, p. 178.

[35] The meaning of the grain has raised yet another dispute: see, Albert B. Friedman, "The Mysterious 'Greyn' in the Prioress's Tale," Chaucer Review, 11 (1976-77), 328-33, who argues that the grain "has no symbolic valence at all but is simply a prop in the dynamics of the story" (330); and Sister Nicholas Maltman, "The Divine Granary, or the End of the Prioress's 'Greyn'," Chaucer Review, 17 (1982-83), 163-70, who replies to Friedman, pointing out that the grain is used only in Chaucer's version (166), and that it is also used in the Childermas where "the grain functions as a symbol of martyrdom but more precisely as a symbol of the soul winnowed or purged from the body" (165). For the

allusions to the Childermas in the *Prioress's Tale*, see Marie Padgett Hamilton, "Echoes of Childermas in the Tale of the Prioress," in *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 88-97, and note 39, below.

[36] The Latin joke is: "*Mulier est hominis confusio*, --/Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,/ 'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis'." (NPT, 3164-66), and see Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 260, for the historical evidence.

[37] According to Carleton Brown, *A Study of The Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer's Prioress*, Chaucer Society, Second Series, No. 45 (London: Kegan Paul, 1910), Chaucer's changes to his source or sources include: specifying the setting as Asia; changing the age of the clergeon from ten to seven; adding the figure of the older boy who explains the song's meaning to the little clergeon; and amplifying the description of the clergeon's school (pp. 115-20). On the last point Brown comments that "the school which he [Chaucer] describes is thoroughly English" (p. 115). On the second point, there has been some discussion. Margaret H. Statler, "The Analogues of Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale*: The Relation of Group C to Group A," *PMLA*, 65 (1950), 896-910, suggests a later contact between the C sub-group, or English group, and the trunk, or A group, which may have been responsible for the change in the clergeon's age. John C. Hirsh, "Reopening the *Prioress's Tale*," *Chaucer Review*, 10 (1975-76), 30-45, suggests that the age is significant. In England, Jews were required to wear the Badge of Shame from the age of seven; hence, the clergeon would have been of an age to be recognized as a non-Jew (31). Jews were, however, officially expelled from England in 1290.

[38] Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1973 [1963]), p. 168.

[39] Payne, pp. 168-69.

[40] Hamilton, p. 91.

[41] Sumner Ferris, "A Hissing Stanza in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 80 (1979), 164-68.

[42] Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 192; Payne, p. 165, n. 26; and Martin Stevens, "The Royal Stanza in Early English Literature," *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 74. Stevens argues that the rhyme royal stanza form "gives Chaucer further

opportunity to characterize the outward formality and show of etiquette as part of the veneer of the Prioress' worldliness" (68).

[43] Archer, 47.

[44] Archer, 47.

[45] Richard J. Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart," in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), pp. 245-58. Despite historical commentaries, for instance, Margaret Schlauch, *English Medieval Literature and Its Social Foundations* (Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1956), p. 265, and extensive replies to this argument, for instance Ridley, *The Prioress*, pp. 1-14, the charge that the *Prioress's Tale* exhibits "the teller's love of cruelty" continues (Stevens, 68). For a more recent reply to both the critical strategy of displacing the anti-Semitism onto the Prioress, and to charging her with cruelty, see Albert B. Friedman, "The *Prioress's Tale* and Chaucer's Anti-Semitism," *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1974-75), 118-29. Although Friedman's arguments and replies are generally astute, Archer's analysis of the anti-Semitism of the tale as a structural component seems to me to be more accurate and useful than Friedman's analysis of its anti-Semitism as "incidental," and the modern reader's concern with it as "a measure of the moral progress of humanity" (127).

[46] Sherman Hawkins, "Chaucer's Prioress and the Sacrifice of Praise," *JEGP*, 63 (1964), 599-624, also makes the point that the Prioress "is naïve in her worldliness, but naïveté is not the same as innocence. The Prioress is childish in the realistic, not the sentimental sense" (624). Hawkins argues that we must read the *Prioress's Tale* figuratively. It "belongs to a world of the allegorical and supernatural rather than the world of literal reality" (599). Hawkin's interpretation rests on the similarities between the Prioress and the clergeon, particularly the Prioress's comment in her prologue: "But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,/ Than kan unnethes any word expresse,/ Right so fare I" (484-86). I am arguing that the differences between the Prioress and the little clergeon are also worth noting.

[47] St. Cecilie's love is active, encompassing, and knowledgeable in spite of, not because of the context in which it is set.

[48] Mary Hamel, "And Now For Something Completely Different: The Relationship Between the *Prioress's Tale* and the *Rime of Sir Thopas*," *Chaucer Review*, 14 (1979-80), 251-

59, argues for the obvious contrasts, especially between the *Prioress's Tale* and *Sir Thopas*: a miracle of the Virgin and a burlesques romance, the triumph of good and the triumph of folly; rime royal and "rym dogerel," and the audience reaction of "wonderful sobriety" and "violent disgust" (252). Hamel also notes the covert similarities between the tales which contribute to the effectiveness of *Sir Thopas*, especially the light structural similarities in the images of the gem and the flower (253-56).

[49] Ridley, *The Prioress*, p. 34, argues for this interpretation, see note 6 above; as does G. H. Russell, "Chaucer: The Prioress's Tale," in *Medieval Literature and Civilization: Studies in Memory of G. N. Garmonsway*, ed. D. A. Pearsall and R. A. Waldron (London: Athlone, 1969), pp. 211-12.

[50] Ridley, *The Prioress*, p. 29.

[51] The socially constructed concept of motherhood is also historically specific. Shahar points to the "dismissal, to the point of total disregard, of the maternal role of women" in the Middle Ages (p. 103). Both Shahar, pp. 98-106, and Carruthers, 221, n.31, point out that wifehood and motherhood are not related concepts in the Middle Ages because a woman's first and most important duty, if married, was to her husband. Shahar adds that they are unrelated because paternity was more important than maternity (p. 99); and because procreation was seen "not as a value in itself" (p. 105).

[52] Ridley, *The Prioress*, p. 24.

[53] On the figure of the mother see Chapter II, note 45, above. The mother's role as intercessor in an hierarchical configuration such as that which prevailed in the Middle Ages depends on her subordination to the all-powerful father, and her subordination necessitates her lack of power.

[54] St. Cecilie's power and non-submission occur at two pivotal points in her tale: she refuses to submit to her husband, Valerian; and she refuses to submit to Almachius.

[55] Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis*, p. 128-39. Muscatine is interested in the poetic responses of the *Pearl* poet, Langland, and Chaucer to their historical situation, a situation he characterizes as "an age of 'crisis'" (p. 14). Chaucer's response is primarily to be found in his use of irony; however, Muscatine argues that pathos "must be by all odds the most persistent alternative to irony that Chaucer felt" (pp. 128-29). In his use of pathos, Chaucer participates "in the full tide of this typically late-

medieval sentimentalization of religious feeling" (p. 129). Muscatine identifies the *Prioress's Tale* as both moving and richly full of pathos (p. 139). Like Ridley, *The Prioress*, p. 29, Muscatine characterizes the Prioress as a "delicate, feminine, maternal nun" (p. 139). See, also, Alfred David, "An ABC to the Style of the Prioress," in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Context 700-1600*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982), who argues for a new religious sensibility as exemplified in the Prioress's rosary: "the tendency of the age to turn religion into art" (p. 148).

[56] Carolyn Collette, "Sense and Sensibility in the *Prioress's Tale*," *Chaucer Review*, 15 (1980-81), 138-50.

[57] Hardy Long Frank, "Chaucer's Prioress and The Blessed Virgin," *Chaucer Review*, 13 (1978-79), 359.

[58] Russell argues for this interpretation, concluding, "For the poem's concern is with the humble and the simple, but not with these as types of human weakness. Humility and simplicity are, in fact, capable of access to sources of strength which enable them not merely to triumph over their apparent human superiors, but to transcend all human limitations" (p. 227).

[59] See, however, Sherman Hawkins' argument that the *Prioress Tale*, being allegorical, does indeed speak the spirit, not the letter (599); and Donald W. Fritz, "The Prioress's Avowal of Ineptitude," *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1974-75), 166-81, who argues that the tale is about eternal realities, the topos of the inexpressible, adding, "We would be in error to take the words of the *Tale* as having their co-reference in time" (167).

[60] An attempt to reconcile a "Madelevian" and "Robertsonian" approach is made by Robert W. Hanning, "The Theme of Art and Life in Chaucer's Poetry," in *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Original Articles*, ed. George D. Economou, Contemporary Studies in Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 15-36. Hanning discusses the Prioress's portrait in the General Prologue in terms of role-playing, notes that "Chaucer makes the limitations of the performance quite clear," and concludes: "The Prioress's art of self-presentation cannot finally protect her from our gentle laughter, but it can and does insulate her against our attempt to find the real woman behind the mask" (p. 32). The problem of reality, in this interpretation, remains unresolved.

[61] Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 342.

Chapter IV: The Wife of Bath

One is not likely to forget the Wife of Bath when considering the women pilgrims of the _Canterbury Tales_. By reputation alone, she looms larger than life. She is described more physically and more fully in the General Prologue than the other two women pilgrims. She is more particularized, especially in her dramatic and self-confessional prologue; and she is more explicitly linked with the central female character of her tale. More than the other two women pilgrims, and perhaps more than any other pilgrim in the _Canterbury Tales_, she may seem real to us. In comparison to the Prioress and the Second Nun, the representation of the Wife of Bath may even seem excessive.

The excessiveness of the Wife of Bath comes, in part, from the enormous amount of criticism that has been written about her. Although a full-length historical study of commentary on the Wife of Bath remains to be written, Caroline Spurgeon has provided us with a brief analysis of the relative popularity of Chaucer's works. Along with the General Prologue, the _Knight's Tale_, and the _Nun's Priest's Tale_, the _Wife of Bath's Prologue_ has been among those parts of the _Canterbury Tales_ to have consistently generated comment. Her Prologue, from Chaucer's time to the end of the eighteenth century, has usually been rated as the sixth most popular of Chaucer's work.[1] In recent years, the Wife of Bath's popularity has mushroomed.[2]

Commentaries on the Wife of Bath offer both startling variety and sharp disagreement. She has been analyzed in terms of her representation in the General Prologue, in terms of her Prologue, in terms of her Tale, or any combination of the three. She has been analyzed in terms of the Marriage Group. She has been analyzed in terms of social reality, economic reality, and psychological reality.[3] She has been perceived as: "licentious;" "scurrilous;" and "spiritually corrupt."[4] Others have found her both an "attractive" and "complex personality;" "both superficially and profoundly religious;" "comic and ironic;" and "flamboyantly displayed."[5] She is said to be feminist, or anti-misogynist, and she is said to be anti-feminist or misogynist.[6] She is a victim and survivor of the patriarchal oppression of women, and she is the embodiment of the wicked wife.[7] From those who perceive her as the New Eve to those who see her as representative of a new social class, the Wife of Bath's fascination for readers is bound up with her femaleness.

The plethora of writings about the Wife of Bath presents its own kinds of problems. Spurgeon comments that "it is curious to reflect that the criticism Chaucer has received throughout these five centuries in reality forms a measurement of judgment -- not of him -- but of his critics."[8] In each historical period, readers bring their own aesthetic values, terminology, tastes, and interests. In addition, it is no longer only the English who comment on the Wife of Bath. English-speaking peoples of varied and widely differing backgrounds now write about the Wife of Bath. In our own century, competing and often incompatible interpretations are complicated by the increased emphasis on theory. The movement to theory in no way resolves the problems of multiple interpretations. Most theoretical writings do insist, however, that no interpretation is innocent of political motivation, or, as Tania Modleski says, "Interpretation is . . . crucially bound up with power."[9]

Whether because or in spite of the superfluity of criticism, and the recent shift to theory, or more likely along with them, the Wife of Bath presents several problems for modern feminist readers. First, the representation of the Wife of Bath is limited. Our sight of her is structured by both her social-economic position and her marital status, the former primarily in the General Prologue, and the latter primarily in her own prologue and tale.[10] With the Prioress, who is also structured by two codes, our sight is limited by the way that the two codes infringe on each other. With the Wife of Bath, the two codes seem to work together to open up possibilities and connections. Nevertheless, the Wife of Bath's position in relation to the institution of marriage is limited in two important ways.

In comparing the Wife of Bath's discussion of marriage with the Second Nun's, we find that marriage has been defined in a different way for each, and that for the Wife of Bath options have been excluded.

The second interpretive problem is more complex because it involves theoretical issues. The Wife of Bath is energetic, intelligent, and learned. She confronts the misogynist tradition, and, whether her interpretation of various authorities is understood as a re-reading or a misinterpretation, she refutes the tradition. Moreover, the Wife of Bath raises many issues of relevance to women, medieval and modern: child marriage, sexual economics, female power, images of women, strategies of survival, the rise of a new class, and the social importance of aging, to mention a few. There is, however, a growing consensus among feminist critics that the Wife of Bath is a male fantasy or wish-fulfillment. The implications of this acknowledgement would seem to put the Wife of Bath's relevance to women readers in jeopardy. The second part of this chapter is concerned with the possibilities of recuperating, winning back, the Wife's relevance for women readers in the face of her status as a male fantasy. While we will find some of these recuperations undesirable because of their theoretical implications, others may point us toward a re-visioning.

In comparison to the other two women pilgrims, the Wife of Bath does, indeed, loom large. She also looms alone.

She is the only secular woman of the three pilgrims, she travels alone, and no contact is ever shown or implied between the Wife of Bath and the two nuns. It would be difficult to find a point of contact between the three women except that they are all women, all three are on pilgrimage to Canterbury, and all three are within the sphere of the medieval religious culture; and the last two points are common to both the female and the male pilgrims.

The Wife of Bath, designated female like the Prioress and the Second Nun, seems to have nothing in common with both of them that is specifically female, feminist, or womanly. There are similarities between the Wife of Bath and the Prioress: for example, the dress code used in the portrayal of each. There are similarities between the Prioress and the Second Nun; both are nuns. There is also, rather surprisingly, a similarity between the Wife of Bath and the Second Nun. The two women pilgrims seem in many ways to be the antithesis of each other. The Second Nun's portrayal is not a physical portrayal. She is not particularized, and the voice of her prologue and tale cannot, with certainty, be said to be a female voice. The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, is physically represented. She is particularized, and the voice of her prologue and tale is specifically a female voice.

The single characteristic which all three women share is their position of dependency or subordination. The Second Nun is subordinated to the Prioress in the worldly sphere, and in the General Prologue, but this position is negated, or perhaps duplicated if the Prioress is understood as a Mary figure, in her prologue. Either way, her subordinate position is moved to the sphere of the divine. The Wife of Bath is represented as an autonomous figure in the General Prologue, and it is not until her prologue that we see her enormous dependency on men.

The Prioress is no less dependent than the other two women. She is dependent on both God and men. The three women most likely reflect the general condition of the vast majority of women in the Middle Ages. Unlike the Prioress, the Wife of Bath and the Second Nun escape, to a great extent, the problem of serving two masters. Despite the fact that each is serving a different master, both women, in their tales, define their separate spheres of action and their separate masters through the same institution -- marriage.

The Wife of Bath takes her subordinate position within marriage as defined in the sphere of the worldly and the physical. The Second Nun's relationship to the earthly, physical realm is severely limited. In her tale, the earthly realm is a stopping point on the way to the divine realm. It is a place in which witness is given to the divine realm. The Second Nun, in the General Prologue, in her own prologue, and in her tale, leads us inexorably to the divine realm. The *Wife of Bath's Tale*, on the other hand, is a tale of transformation which has, at best, a tenuous teleological relationship to the divine realm. In her tale, we are concerned with what Erich Auerbach calls "earthly love," or sexual desire. Speaking of Boccaccio's Decameron, Auerbach says, "[It] develops a distinct, thoroughly practical and secular, ethical code rooted in the right to love, an ethics which in its very essence is anti-Christian."[11] The old hag's transformation at the end of the Wife of Bath's Tale is a response to an earthly, sexual desire, just as the Wife's last words, her prayer-curse, assert the right to earthly love. The Wife of Bath's failure to go beyond the earthly, physical realm is pointed out by the early manuscript glosses. According to Graham Caie, the glosses "stress the Wife's deafness to the spiritual meaning of the texts, a deafness which shows, not a deficient intelligence, but a defiant refusal to listen to the New Law and to renounce her licentiousness in order to follow Christ's example, as the Woman of Samaria had done." In addition, Caie says, the glosses "point out the figurative meaning of marriage and its moral significance not only for wives but for all mankind."[12]

In line with this basic difference, marriage in the Second Nun's Tale occurs early in the narrative. It is the means by which St. Cecilie meets her converts, and it provides a test of her commitment to virginity and saintliness. Marriage is not a significant element in the Second Nun's Prologue for St. Cecilie, and it is not an aspect of her martyrdom. In the Wife of Bath's Tale, marriage and its physical consummation are the ending of the tale, the final narrative event to which the tale moves, and with which it ends.

In the tales of both the Second Nun and the Wife of Bath, the physical condition of the female body is of paramount importance. St. Cecilie maintains her virginity, and her virginity sustains the narrative. The *Second Nun's Tale* ends with the mutilation of her body in the physical realm, but the mutilation does not prevent her from preaching, that is, from fulfilling her spiritual mission. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the rape of the virgin sets the narrative in motion. Once raped, the now non-virgin disappears from the narrative. Like virginity, she was a narrative function.

Virginity functions in a similar manner in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. In accordance with more general cultural views, the Wife holds virginity in great reverence. "Virginitee," she says, "is greet perfeccion" (WBP, 105); it is to "lyve parfitly" (WBP, 111). The Wife elevates virginity. She acknowledges it as a standard, even as she aggressively admits it to be a standard she cannot meet. Her first experience of marriage suggests why the standard cannot be met. For the Wife of Bath, married at the age of twelve to an old man, virginity was never a choice, and her sexual initiation must seem more like socially sanctioned rape than the payment of a marriage debt. In a culture like our own, where women are marrying later and later, if at all, the Wife of Bath's marriage at twelve to an old man is shocking, and her easy acceptance of the cultural practice no less so.[13]

The two differing narrative uses of marriage in the Second Nun's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale are indicative of a cultural dilemma over the nature of marriage in the Middle Ages. In the Second Nun's Tale, marriage approaches the sacramental nature attributed to it by the church. It does not become a sacrament in the tale because the emphasis is on virginity, rather than on either virginity in marriage or marriage itself. In other words, virginity and martyrdom are the outwards signs of grace, not matrimony. The difficulty in making marriage a sacrament lay precisely in the extremely high value placed on virginity by the church. As Georges Duby says, "the sacrament of marriage was still kept in the background, still tinged by vestiges of anxiety and repulsion regarding what went on at night in the marriage bed."[14]

In the English context, the paucity of nuns might have made the whole problem of marriage and virginity irrelevant, but, of course, it did not. The elevation of virginity continued, even though there was no cohesive or continued attempt to encourage or provide the economic means by which women could maintain their virginal status. The absence of meaningful alternatives might be seen as an attempt to resolve the problem; the opportunity to remain a virgin or to become a nun narrowed, and the choice of whether to marry or not became non-existent.[15]

Virginity could be extolled with some safety, there being little chance that many women could choose it. In the sense, then, that the Wife of Bath could only most improbably have become a nun, or remained a virgin, the acknowledgement of the superiority of virginity in her prologue serves only to clear the ideological space from which she will speak. She acknowledges the superiority of virginity, denigrates herself accordingly, and moves on to her experience of marriage. Virginity slips into the background, even as it slips into the background in her tale. Instead of marriage conceived as a sacrament, marriage in her prologue and tale is the legal and economic exchange of physical sex.[16]

Yet, if the Wife of Bath is unable to choose the option of virginity, in or out of marriage, widowhood would have been a less impossible choice. This possibility is foreclosed. Although Dame Alisoun is, in fact, a widow, or becomes one in the course of her discourse, she is still known as the Wife of Bath. Widowhood is never shown or mentioned as a desirable option. Considering that, as Shahar notes, "a widow who was well provided for enjoyed greater freedom than any other type of woman in medieval society," this foreclosure is odd.[17]

Widowhood is referred to twice, both times in the _Wife of Bath's Tale_. One answer to the question of what women desire is: "And oftetyme to be wydwe and wedde" (WBT, 928).

The reversal of the more usual chronological order, one first weds and then becomes a widow, may be attributed to the necessities of the rhyme scheme: "abedde" is the word from the previous verse which requires a rhyme. It may, also, indicate that widowhood is desirable only as a precondition to another marriage. To be a widow is not, in itself, desirable. Since the entire movement of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale is the movement toward marriage, it is of necessity a movement away from widowhood. Although for different reasons, widowhood is erased in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale as thoroughly as it is in the Second Nun's Prologue and Tale.

A possible allusion to widowhood in the Wife of Bath's Tale does not specifically refer to being a widow: "For to be free, and do right as us lest,/ And that no man repreve us of oure vice" (WBT, 936-37). The first part of this answer to the question of what women desire is a description of being a widow in the Middle Ages. Widowhood has already been foreclosed in the first allusion, and by its conspicuous absence throughout the prologue and tale, but the second part of the possible answer here suggests that for a woman to be free and do as she likes is to say that she will indulge in vice. The emphasis is not on freedom from marriage, but freedom from reproof.

The question of the Wife's tale, what do women desire, is hedged in by two limitations which are also operative in the Wife's prologue. Widowhood is excluded as a possibility, while virginity is the preferred answer, given before the question is raised. To be defined in a non-sexual and non-heterosexual way is not a possibility at all. The context in which the question is raised necessitates an answer which will place women in sexual relation to men. The knight's answer, given to him by the "olde wyf" (WBT, 1000), is: "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love,/ And for to been in maistrie hym above" (WBT, 1038-40). Although we are told that neither wife, maid, nor widow disagreed with this answer: "In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde,/ Ne wydwe, that contraried that he sayde" (WBT, 1043-44), this must seem, in context, gratuitous. The question of women's desire has already precluded her desire outside her heterosexual relation to men. Her desire is, moreover, fixed or situated within heterosexual marriage. Desire is transformed into heterosexual desire and firmly located within women as physical bodies. This is not a surprising insight; women were identified with the body through the Eve tradition or analogy.

The representation of the Wife of Bath is excessive. Her title, her five marriages, her prologue and tale of sexual desire, her full physical representation all point to a representation defined in terms of the earthly and physical. Marriage is defined in terms of earthly love, not in terms of spiritual love as it is in the Second Nun's Tale. Moreover, women's desire is situated within heterosexual marriage. Virginity, in or out of marriage, and widowhood are both excluded as desirable options. Woman's desire is defined as the sexual desire for men. The Wife of Bath's size, from "hir hipes large" (GP, 472) to the length of her prologue and tale -- her prologue is as long as the General Prologue, and only the Knight's Tale is longer than her prologue and tale -- underlines the narrow way in which she is defined.

Chaucer's addition, or what William Matthews calls his "major departure" from the literary tradition of the heterosexually "randy old woman" is to make the Wife of Bath married.[18] With this addition, her sexual desire for men is both confined and made excessive. The confinement comes from the fact that the Wife feels that she must marry in order to attain sex from men. Her sexuality is controlled by the necessity of marriage. At the same time, the Wife has married five times. She acknowledges the necessity of marriage, and its controlling function, but she exceeds it by repetition, and by making marriage the means of attaining her sexual ends. Because the Wife seems to envision an endless succession of husbands, she exceeds the apparent limitations. She exceeds them not by going beyond them but simply by repetition, that is, she escapes the control of any one marriage over her sexuality by multiplying the marriages. Nevertheless, her desire is sexual desire, and it is confined within the institution of heterosexual marriage.

On the face of it, the Wife of Bath, defined as a physical body whose desire is the sexual desire for men channeled through the institution of marriage, is a male fantasy. Some critics think that we have not, in arriving at this conclusion, seen far enough. Robert Hanning, for instance, discussing the Prioress and the Wife of Bath, says:

> Instead of attacking female behavior, Chaucer perceived it as a conscious and unconscious response to the situation in which women were placed by their world. Rather than praising or condemning them, Chaucer's art shapes our understanding of the interplay of character and social environment that makes Alisoun and Eglentyne the complex, unforgettable women they still are.[19]

Hanning's interpretation is important as much for where it was published as for what it says. It was published in one of the two most prestigious North American women's studies journals: _Signs_. Hence, his interpretation is both addressed to feminist scholars, and takes its place amongst feminist scholarship. For these reasons, it is important to consider the implications of his approach and conclusions.

Hanning's "admittedly large claims for Chaucer's insights into the roles women play,"[20] depends on a division between role and self. In other words, there are roles which are played or assumed, and which are to be differentiated from the "true" self. In this case, the true self, the Wife of Bath, can be discerned from the contradictions of her Prologue and Tale, for instance, that sex is for procreation, and that sex is for pleasure. Hanning further argues that she is "trapped between sexual and intellectual needs."[21] He continues:

> A marital relationship thus becomes a way of revenging herself on men by oppressing them and of fulfilling her desires by assuming male roles, both sexual and, as she becomes a clerk of marriage, intellectual as well. In the process, she becomes the target of some of her own hostility. Role denial, forcible role assumption, and self-hatred for becoming the oppressor -- this cycle seems the expression of a peculiarly modern analysis that confirms Chaucer's genius.[22]

Hanning's analysis is troublesome for a number of reasons. One of the troublesome areas centers on the question of Chaucer considering the roles of women in his society in terms of the feminist/anti-feminist rhetoric of his time: why choose the misogynist rhetoric of his time to explore the limitations of the roles of women? Indeed, one of the limitations placed on women was precisely this rhetoric and the sentiments that it displays. Then, too: why, if Chaucer is exploring the limitations, does he do so by limiting the possibilities? Another troublesome area centers on the distinction between roles and the self who lives those roles. Two distinctions are commonly used in describing the Wife of Bath. The first is that the Wife is highly individualized, and that her individuality allows us to see a difference between roles that are prescribed by her society and the self who lives them out. By emphasizing the contradictions in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, Hanning would seem to be basing his interpretation on this distinction. Yet, there is no reason to think that the particularities of the Wife of Bath are at odds with the medieval view of women. Many of them are not only in line with the view of women, but actually contribute to this view. For instance, Hanning says, "The contradictions of the Wife's self-presentation are overwhelming even to her: she is in fact the only Canterbury pilgrim to lose the thread of her story momentarily (585-86)."[23] This detail of the Wife of Bath's discourse may point to her awareness of contradictions, but it also affirms the medieval societal view that women were incapable of sustained rational thought or speech. The Wife's verbal wanderings correspond to her physical "wandrynge by the weye" (GP, 467).

A second and more popular way of distinguishing between roles and self is to point to the Wife of Bath's consciousness of her self. Within this distinction, society's projections which the Wife of Bath confirms are crucially separated by her consciousness. She lives out the roles projected on her, but she is aware both that she is living out these roles, and that her society views them and her negatively. Hope Phyllis Weissman, for instance, comments, "The Wife's awareness of herself as a woman violated is deeply embedded in her consciousness," adding in a footnote that "[a] sense of this continually leads modern readers into psychoanalytic interpretations."[24]

Barbara Gottfried largely by-passes both the difficulties of distinguishing between roles and self, and the problems of making the Wife's self-consciousness paramount. Gottfried argues for the "paradoxical quality" of the _Wife of Bath's Prologue_ and _Tale_.[25] On the one hand, the Wife attempts to speak women's experience. On the other hand, she does so in a world dominated by men who have already determined the rhetoric in which she speaks. As Gottfried recognizes, the result is a "double bind," which "the Wife of Bath attempts to overcome, and is yet caught in."[26] Gottfried spells out the implications of this double bind for the Wife's self-consciousness:

> Even as she attempts a deconstruction of patriarchal literature in an experiential revision of it, the Wife necessarily falls short of the goal of overcoming authority because she can only define herself in relation to that authority. She does

> not speak simply about herself, but realizes herself through her relationship to the various manifestations of patriarchy. Not only does she borrow her categories and the terms of her self-evaluation from the very literature she condemns; patriarchal authority determines the fundamental bases for her self-definition. . . . Thus patriarchal society generates both the misogynist literature she protests against, and the opposition to it she herself embodies.[27]

Hence, the Wife's self-consciousness is not a reaction to oppression; it is the expression of her oppression and it is created by her society. In other words, her self-consciousness is the mark of her marginality. The dominant groups have no need of self-consciousness for themselves; all is right with their world and with them in it. Only marginal groups need self-consciousness. By way of self-consciousness, the dominant groups are able to define, recognize, and validate marginal groups as marginal groups. It also allows the dominant groups to define and channel the resistance of marginal groups to their marginal status. In short, self-consciousness is the means by which the Wife of Bath's oppression by the dominant groups is returned to her as her personal problem.

The other half of Gottfried's argument of paradox centers on the Wife as speaker and survivor. The Wife, "through the recreative act of speaking, reconstructs her 'experience' in relation to men." As survivor, the Wife's

> performance -- the way in which she speaks, what she does and doesn't say, her rationalizations and defenses, and her re-creative power -- reveal the psychic cost, and benefits, of her survival in a culture in which her own experience runs counter to the authority of the prevailing ideology.[28]

This half of Gottfried's argument seems problematic in view of the other half of her argument. While it is true that Gottfried sees the two halves as paradoxically related, we may still ask what status we can accord to the Wife as speaker: particularly in view of the fact that, as Gottfried says, she "realizes herself through her relationship to the various manifestations of patriarchy."[29] Moreover, as Gottfried recognizes, the Wife is speaking to representatives of the patriarchy: "To whom is she speaking, after all? There are no wives in her audience. The only women present in the 'now' of the pilgrimage are members of holy orders. The Wife does not even bother to include them when she addresses her audience. . . ."[30] To whom, then, does the Wife of Bath "reveal the psychic cost, and benefits, of her survival"?[31] And, how will this audience understand her survival? These questions are crucial, and we will return to them after looking at one other critic's analysis of the

Wife of Bath.

Like Gottfried, Lee Patterson sees the pattern of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* as one of "withdrawal and return."[32] In Patterson's argument, however, this pattern is the central concern as a poetic technique. Like Gottfried, Patterson understands the Wife as trapped in a masculine fantasy. Speaking of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and the hag's assertion and subsequent return of "maistrye," she says,

> The feminine desire that is anatomized throughout the Tale is here revealed to be, in its authentic form, determined by a desire that is not only masculine but is beyond scrutiny. The Wife's "queynte fantasye," in short, is a masculine wish fulfillment, and one in which she appears to be fully complicit.[33]

Like Gottfried, Patterson is not willing to leave the Wife of Bath at that. The implications at this point are that the Wife is the masculine construct of a difference, the feminine viewpoint, which turns out to be the same as the masculine viewpoint of the feminine.

Patterson makes a twofold recuperation of the early implications of her argument. First, she argues that the Wife of Bath's conclusion, her curse, "undoes the very resolution at which she has herself arrived by suggesting that it may be merely the latest, most insidious move in an endless battle of the sexes."[34] Like Gottfried, Patterson posits some trace of an authentic, female voice. The masculine construct of a difference, the feminine viewpoint, contains some truth.

Patterson reclaims the early implications of her argument in a second way which is of more interest. Among other things, Patterson links the Wife of Bath to medieval poetics. She points to the analogy between sexuality and reading and writing: "The voice of the poet is inescapably aligned with that of women: his rhetoric is, to an important degree, always feminine."[35] Furthermore, the analogy extends to the body of the text as capable of seducing the reader: female/feminine text; male/masculine reader and writer. This analogy is found with La Vieille in the *Roman de la Rose* and the Wife of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales*. Patterson sees these women functioning "as both agents and paradigms of resolution." Their mode of rhetoric is feminine; it is "verbal dilation," a "pattern of enticement and delay."[36] In important ways, this pattern is also, of necessity, the secular poet's method. Especially in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Parson must not tell his tale until the end. His tale, whenever it is spoken, will end the sequence. The poet, like the Wife of Bath, practices enticement and delay, pulling the reader toward the end, but delaying it. The Wife of Bath acts as "an agent of deferral." As Patterson argues, however,

> [T]his is a postponement and not a dismissal, and a digression that leads inevitably if eventually to the goal. Her rhetoric has as its goal not mere delectation but the higher pleasures of ethical understanding, an understanding that may properly be seen as preparatory to the Parson's absolutism. By introducing a rhetoric that is at once carnal and moral, in other words, the Wife of Bath ameliorates the harsh polarizations of Augustinian theory and opens up a space in which what we have come to call literature can find its home. And when we do finally arrive at the Parson's Tale we discover to our surprise that both penitential pilgrimage and playful tale-telling have reached a simultaneous conclusion, that the Parson will now both "knitte up al this feste and make an ende." The longest way round has proved to be the shortest way home.[37]

To put it more simply, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine" (Retraction, 1083), eventually. Given the dominant religious perspective of the period, with the end never being in doubt, the secular poet adheres to that end, even while writing in the spatiotemporal dimension leading up to it.

Patterson further argues that the Wife of Bath allows

Chaucer "a means of restaging the chronic ambivalence towards authorship that dogged him throughout his career and which to judge from the Retractions, was finally resolved only in silence."[38] Along with this restaging, she sees two ways of reading. The first is the orthodox medieval way of reading in which meaning is already given:

> What is important about this hermeneutic is that it is preemptive: the reader already knows before he approaches the text what will be the result of his reading, and his interpretive task is not to discover _what_ the text means but its way of signifying the meaning it must have. Armed with the strength of the spirit, he is immune to the solicitations of the letter, for he knows that the letter is a mere covering, a veil to be torn aside and discarded in the pursuit of truth.[39]

The alternate way of reading is to wait until the end. The Wife of Bath, Patterson says, "offers a mode of reading that is at once literal and moral; and she insists that interpretation must be deferred, that meaning (whether literary or personal) is available only at the end (whether of a narrative or a life)."[40]

Patterson offers us an admirably intelligent reading of the Wife of Bath. It is a reading which is not premised on her individual consciousness as the dividing edge between what men thought of women and what women thought about the way men thought about them, which turns out to be identical with what men thought of women. Patterson's interpretation is, nevertheless, bothersome on a number of grounds. Most immediately, one might ask what is to become of the female reader and the feminist reader of today in this sexual analogy of reading that prevailed in the Middle Ages. It seems apropos to wonder as well about the female reader of the fourteenth century. Based on the historical evidence, Richard Green has argued that Chaucer's audience, like most courtly audiences, was usually and overwhelmingly male. Although the number of women at court was increasing by the end of the fourteenth century, the evidence indicates that this increase was a novelty. As Green says, "The probability that there were some women, albeit in rather small numbers, and perhaps only *occasionally*, in Chaucer's audience seems high."[41]

Women's numerical disadvantage in courtly audiences seems to have resulted, largely, in women's silence. One of the few responses which survives comes from Christine de Pisan. Her reaction to the *Roman de la Rose*, in which La Vieille functions in a similar way to the Wife of Bath in Patterson's interpretation, is well-known. She was neither inspired by nor welcoming of this use of the female-feminine as a way for men to work out their problems. Although we need not adopt Christine de Pisan's position, we may consider that she is credited with "refocusing the old medieval debate on marriage and satires on women into the issue of misogyny itself and by opening this debate to women."[42] Thus, in The Book of the City of Ladies, she compares the male voices of authority who "all concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice," with "the natural behavior and character of women." The result of this conflict, given the value she initially accords to authority, is silence: "it seemed as if I were in a stupor."[43]

Christine de Pisan rouses herself from this stupor to offer a variety of strategies for resolving the conflict. Several of her strategies merit our attention. First, she orientates herself in relation to other women. She seeks out the opinion of other women, and she creates a female audience, herself as the recipient of the dream-vision in The Book of the City of Ladies, and women in general in The Treasure of the City of Ladies.[44] Second, she creates her own authorities. Experience is not enough, until it is backed by the authority of Lady Reason's words. Third, Christine de Pisan is not afraid to point out the limitations of male representations of women, even as she uses these limitations for the occasion and justification of her own project.

With these insights from a fourteenth-century reader and writer in mind, we may return to the Wife of Bath who is inextricably entangled with marriage. Her body, her intelligence, and her desire are all contained by and within the institution of marriage. This important characterizing aspect of the Wife of Bath is not adequately addressed in Patterson's interpretation. She does not understand the Wife of Bath as marrying endlessly. "If we truly understand the Wife of Bath as a traditional figure," she says, "we will remember that the tradition she articulates depends for its own vitality on the threat of temporality."[45] In the other examples discussed by Patterson, old age is the temporal threat, not a long series of marriages. In the Wife of Bath's Tale, old age is transformed through and by marriage, at once keeping the series open, staving off the temporal threat, and keeping the discourse and the woman within the temporal, worldly realm, continually under threat of temporal disruption.

Marriage both contains the Wife of Bath and opens other possibilities of tension and ambivalence, but it is not just marriage that does this. It is marriage understood in a particular way: marriage as understood in relation to women as heterosexual bodies. Hence, when Patterson says of women that "the ambivalence towards women is one aspect of a nexus of unresolved tensions endemic to medieval culture as a whole,"[46] we must add that it is women as heterosexual bodies to which we are referring. To speak from this position, as the Wife of Bath does, is to embody the ambivalence and the unresolved tensions that go with being conceived as a heterosexual female body.

We may go on to ask the questions: To whom does the

Wife of Bath "reveal the psychic cost, and benefits, of her survival"? And, how will this audience understand her survival? Numerous answers are possible. The Canterbury pilgrims seem to understand the Wife's prologue and tale as an example, as she says, of the "wo that is in mariage" (WBP, 3). Since this audience is overwhelmingly male, the Pardoner's response, despite the potential irony, seems valid. The Wife is giving a warning to men about women's carnal nature. The early glosses to the Wife of Bath's Prologue support this interpretation.[47] If we posit a fourteenth-century medieval audience which includes a small number of women, we may infer from the reactions of Christine de Pisan that this audience will be either silenced or it will deny that the Wife of Bath is representative of women. This audience will not see the Wife as a survivor or as a speaker of women's experience. This is an audience which denies the effect of lies about women; "For," as Lady Reason tells Christine de Pisan, "you know that any evil spoken of women so generally only hurts those who say it, not women themselves."[48] Finally, there is the modern feminist reader. She will see the Wife as a speaker and a survivor, and she will notice the effects that Christine de Pisan denies: silence and Christine de Pisan's own stupor and subsequent defense. If she posits an authenticity to the Wife as a speaker of female experience, it will be in view of the historical evidence as we understand it, that is, in view of the limitations and effects which we now understand as the oppression of women, and in view of our power as speakers to say so.

CHAPTER IV: Notes

[1] Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Introd., *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900*, Vol. 1 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), p. lxxix.

[2] In a rough count of the MLA Index for the years 1981 to 1985, only one other part of the *Canterbury Tales* was more commented on than the Wife of Bath, and that was the *Pardoner's Tale*. The *Franklin's Tale*, not even mentioned in Spurgeon's enumeration, came a close third. The number of references to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* during the period 1981-1985 was approximately twenty-five.

[3] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), pp. 130-159, is the classic study of the Marriage Group. Dorothy Colmer, "Character and Class in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*," *JEGP*, 72 (1973), 329-39, argues that "even in her defiant individualism, the Wife is a representative figure of an age of social upheaval. She adds to the clamour for recognition raised by the new rich middle class" (330). Mary Carruthers analyzes the Wife of Bath in economic terms, while Beryl Rowland, "Chaucer's Dame Alys: Critics in Blunderland?" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 73 (1972), 381-95, looks at the Wife of Bath in psychological terms.

[4] The term "licentious" is used by John Dryden in a comment made in 1700: "I translated *Chaucer* first, and amongst the rest, pitch'd on The Wife of *Bath's* Tale [sic]; not daring, as I have said, to adventure on her Prologue, because 'tis too licentious." The term "scurrilous" is used by Sir John Harington in 1591. He says that Chaucer "incurreth far more the reprehension of flat scurrilitie, as I could recite many places, not onely in his millers tale, but in the good wife of Bathes tale, & many more." Both quotations are from Brewer, *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, Vol. 1, p. 171 and p. 130, respectively. Jewell Parker Rhodes, "Female Stereotypes in Medieval Literature: Androgyny and the Wife of Bath," *Journal of Women's Studies in Literature*, 1 (1979), 348-52, describes the Wife of Bath as "spiritually corrupt" (348).

[5] Jill Mann, p. 126; Gloria K. Shapiro, "Dame Alice as Deceptive Narrator," *Chaucer Review*, 6 (1971-72), 139; Sister Ritamary Bradley, "The *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the Mirror Tradition," *JEGP*, 55 (1956), 630; and Colmer, 329, respectively.

[6] See, for example, Kenneth J. Oberembt, "Chaucer's Anti-misogynist Wife of Bath," *Chaucer Review*, 10 (1975-76), 287-302; and, on the other side of the opposition, D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 317-31. The opposition between feminist/anti-misogynist and anti-feminist/misogynist is complicated by the question of whether the Wife of Bath's position is heretical or not.

[7] Gottfried, 202-24; and W. F. Bolton, "The Wife of Bath: Narrator as Victim," *Women & Literature*, N.S. 1 (1980), 54-65, argue that the Wife of Bath is a victim and survivor. James L. Boren, "Alysoun of Bath and the Vulgate 'Perfect Wife'," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 76 (1975), 247-56; and William Matthews, "The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect," *Viator*, 5 (1974), 413-43, argue that the Wife of Bath is the embodiment of the wicked wife and woman.

[8] Spurgeon, Introd., p. cxxiv-cxxv.

[9] Tania Modleski, "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings," in *Feminist Studies/ Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 136.

[10] Because the representation of the Wife of Bath is structured by both her social-economic position and her marital status, she is a good example of Shahar's thesis on the categorization of women within the fourth estate. See, Introduction, pp. 7-8, above.

[11] Auerbach, pp. 226-27.

[12] Graham D. Caie, "The Significance of the Early Chaucer Manuscript Glosses (With Special Reference to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*)," *Chaucer Review*, 10 (1975-76), 357.

[13] There are many different moral positions from which one may criticize this cultural practice: the dark humor of the *Merchant's Tale*, for instance. Kittredge says of this tale that it shows the Merchant's hatred of women and contempt "for himself and all other fools who will not take warning by example. For we should not forget that the satire is aimed at January rather than at May. That

egotistical old dotard is less excusable than his young wife, and meets with less mercy at the Merchant's hands" (145). For the Merchant, the problem with old men marrying young women is the harm which old men do to themselves. Nevertheless, the harm which is done to young women forms a part of our response to the tale, especially in so far as we share May's perspective of January: "But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,/ Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,/ In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;/ She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene" (The Merchant's Tale, ll. 1851-1854).

[14] Duby, p. 184. For an account of marriage from the perspective of a fourteenth-century woman, see Margery Kempe, The Book of Margery Kempe: A Modern Version, ed. W. Butler-Bowden, The Life and Letters Series No. 103 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940 [1936]). Kempe repeatedly attempted to convince her husband that they should live chastely within marriage, but with little initial success. He continued to "use" her, and she continued to comply out of obedience (p. 31). Later the Lord appears to Kempe, telling her that "though the state of maidenhood be more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of wedlock, yet, daughter, I love thee as well as any maiden in the world. No man may hinder Me in loving whom I will" (p. 82). Kempe's book is a painful account of a medieval woman's attempt to reconcile the contradictions of her society. God's love does not change the hierarchy of perfection which placed Kempe, a married woman, at the bottom, although it does provide solace.

[15] Although the choice of whether to marry or not might seem a class-specific choice, Christopher Middleton, "The Sexual Division of Labour in Feudal England," New Left Review, Nos. 113-114 (Jan.-Apr. 1979), 147-68, documents some surprising findings among the peasantry in feudal England. First, "it was among the peasantry performing labour-services . . . that the role of housewife attained its highest contemporary evolution" (166). In addition, "out of all the female peasantry, the greatest sufferers [from the sexual division of labour] were those most likely to be unmarried and so for whom the biological (reproductive) constraints were immaterial or at least minimized" (167). The "choice" not to marry carried penalties which affected women regardless of class, although the nature of the penalty was class-specific.

[16] See Delany, for an excellent discussion of the sexual-economics, pp. 76-92; and see Elizabeth M. Makowski, "The Conjugal Debt and Medieval Canon Law," Journal of Medieval History, 3 (1977), 99-114, for "the impact of legalism on medieval institutions" (99).

[17] Shahar, p. 95.

[18] Matthews, 442. Matthews offers two reasons for Chaucer's departure from the tradition: "To observe the propriety of a religious occasion," and "to facilitate this [marriage] debate" (442). Matthews draws very different conclusions from Chaucer's departure from the tradition.

[19] Hanning, "From _Eva_ and _Ave_," 599.

[20] Hanning, "From _Eva_ and _Ave_," 582.

[21] Hanning, "From _Eva_ and _Ave_," 599.

[22] Hanning, "From _Eva_ and _Ave_," 599.

[23] Hanning, "From _Eva_ and _Ave_," 594.

[24] Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Why Chaucer's Wife is From Bath," _Chaucer Review_, 15 (1980-81), 36, n. 48. See, also, Richmond's comment on the enormous amount and diversity of critical responses: "The fascination of modern psychology explains much of this interest and diversity of analysis and also the tendency of critics to focus on the Prologue rather than the Tale or the larger theme of the Marriage Group" (326).

[25] Gottfried, 203.

[26] Gottfried, 202.

[27] Gottfried, 203.

[28] Gottfried, 202.

[29] Gottfried, 203.

[30] Gottfried, 208.

[31] Gottfried, 202.

[32] For Gottfried, the pattern of withdrawal and return refers to the Wife's "almost complete absorption in what she is saying, and a self-conscious awareness of the audience to whom she is speaking" (206).

[33] Patterson, 683. Patterson reaches this same conclusion, "from another direction," asking, "what kind of independence can we attribute to a female protagonist who is so evidently a creature of the male imagination?" (687).

[34] Patterson, 684.

[35] Patterson, 659.

[36] Patterson, 675. Patterson argues that this rhetorical pattern is the pattern by which the self is both exposed and hidden: "At the heart of the Wife's dilated discourse, then, rests the self that it both masks and discloses" (679).

[37] Patterson, 695. Patterson's emphasis is consistently on endings, and she gives the Wife of Bath the last word, saying, "She makes us ourselves desire an ending, and she herself insists that there is an ending to be desired" (695).

[38] Patterson, 659.

[39] Patterson, 694.

[40] Patterson, 694.

[41] Green, 150.

[42] Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400-1789," *Signs*, 8 (1982), 15.

[43] Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), p. 4 (I.1.1).

[44] Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies; or the Book of the Three Virtues*, trans. Sarah Lawson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), begins, "From us three sisters, daughters of God, named Reason, Rectitude and Justice, to all princesses, empresses, queens, duchesses and high-born ladies ruling over the Christian world, and generally to all women: loving greetings" (p. 35, Part One, Book 1).

[45] Patterson, 695.

[46] Patterson, 659.

[47] See Caie, who points out both the general tendencies and the fact that in the manuscripts "the glosses are given a highly prominent position side-by-side with the text" (350). See also, note 12 above.

[48] Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p. 8 (I.3.1).

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